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THE NEW STATESMAN

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Liz Truss has misread the times

There are times in a nation's history when it becomes more than an imagined community. The period of mourning that followed the death of Queen Elizabeth II was one such moment. As hundreds of thousands of people queued for up to 24 hours to see the Queen lying in state in Westminster Hall in London, they experienced a rare sense of togetherness and solidarity. The qualities for which the Queen was admired by monarchists and republicans alike – civility, patience, common decency – were on full display in the Queue.

But this moment of unity cannot mask the reality that the United Kingdom is facing one of the most fraught periods in its postwar history. The economy is on the edge of recession, living standards are plummeting and public services are increasingly overwhelmed.

For these maladies, Liz Truss's radical right-wing government has prescribed a clear remedy: rapid economic growth. Her administration has announced that it will freeze household energy bills for two years, reverse the rise in National Insurance that was implemented in April and cancel the planned increase in corporation tax, and it has hinted at removing the cap on bankers' bonuses. The aim of these measures is to help meet the new target of 2.5 per cent annual GDP growth set by the Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the UK economy has grown at an average annual rate of just 1.5 per cent (compared to 2.7 per cent before the crash). Of the G7 countries, only Italy has fared worse.

The UK's anaemic performance has intensified the living standards crisis. As the Resolution Foundation, a think tank, has charted, by 2018 UK median disposable incomes were just 9 per cent higher than in 2005, compared with 40 per cent higher in Germany and 39.8 per cent in France. Slovenia and Poland are among the European countries now projected to record higher living standards than Britain this decade. To avoid this fate, the UK needs a larger economy.

We welcome the Truss administration's decision to prioritise growth over a narrow fixation on deficit reduction. As Gerard Lyons, an economist close to the Prime Minister, writes on page 23, "this thinking wrongly led the [Cameron] government to opt for austerity a decade ago". The UK, which enjoys a lender of last resort (the Bank of England) and can borrow in its own currency, has far greater fiscal freedom than eurozone members.

KLAWE RZECZY

Truss is not a bridge-builder; she does not aspire to reach out across difference in order build a new cross-class coalition

But while higher growth is the right aim, the Truss government's means are more questionable. The UK's greatest economic problem has been its dismal productivity growth (output per hour worked rose by just 0.7 per cent between 2009 and 2019). This reflects parlous levels of public and private investment, poor skills and training, and antiquated infrastructure. But rather than addressing this crisis, Ms Truss has prioritised expensive tax cuts.

We opposed the 1.25 point National Insurance rise on the grounds that it penalised low-income workers – a wealth tax would have been more progressive. But its reversal is an odd priority during a living standards crisis. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has found, the poorest households will gain just £7.66 a year from the measure while the richest ones gain £1,800 a year. Raising Universal Credit would be both fairer and better for growth: unlike the wealthiest, the poorest are forced to spend, rather than save, their disposable income. If living standards are to rise sustainably, the UK must not just become a richer economy; it must also become a more equal one.

After a decade of austerity that has frayed the public realm, and an unprecedented period of wage stagnation, voters are craving security and an active state. Ms Truss's free-market, small-state individualism is ill-suited to the temper of these times. She has little or nothing to say about the improvement of public services, the UK's regional inequalities and the common good. She is not a bridge-builder; she does not aspire to reach out across difference in order to build a new cross-class coalition. Even the Union between England and Scotland – which the Queen so cherished – seems of little concern.

The Prime Minister may have a vision of a larger economy but she has no vision of a better society. This creates an opening for Labour and the opposition parties, ideally working together, to forge a new settlement.

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40-42 Hatton Garden, London EC1N 8EB
Tel 020 8269 7959

Editor-in-chief Jason Cowley
Chief Executive Ken Appiah
Political Editor Andrew Marr
International Editor Megan Gibson

For full staff listing, please visit newstatesman.com

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Klawe Rzeczy

Outside the box By Becky Barnicoat

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WAIT—DID WE PUT THE RETURNS FORM IN?
B.BARNICOAT FOR THE NEW STATESMAN

"Get up. Dust yourself off. Go again, son."

In 2015 George Bevis created Tide, the banking app for business. It took courage, coming in the wake of several less fortunate ventures. But resilience is vital for anyone striking out on their own and George's ability to bounce back goes back to his childhood. Unsure of how to act after getting into a little bit of trouble at school, he turned to his late father for counsel. His Dad said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Get up. Dust yourself off. Go again, son." George still treasures this piece of advice. It gives him the strength to jump the inevitable hurdles that litter the path to success. Like George we know the best advice you'll get is from someone who knows you well. The kind of powerful good advice that you can expect from Evelyn Partners. Because we take the time to truly understand you. What motivates, inspires and drives you. To help you flourish.

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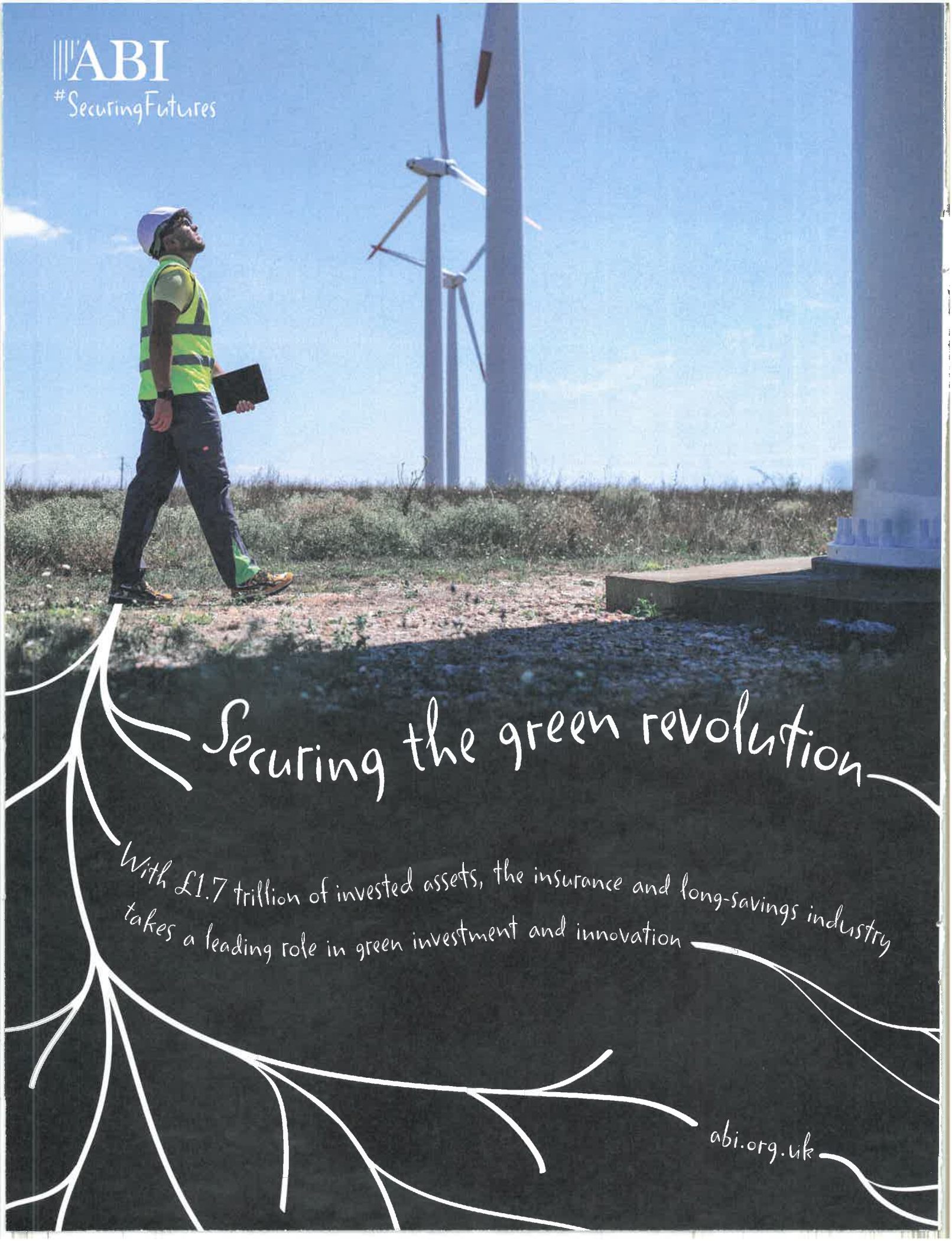
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THE NOTEBOOK

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Comment

Vladimir Putin's fatal flaw: he cannot accept defeat

By Katie Stallard

As Russia's defensive lines in north-eastern Ukraine collapsed on 10 September and Russian troops ran for their lives, Vladimir Putin was presiding over the opening of a new Ferris wheel in Moscow. "It is 140 metres high," the president marvelled. "There is nothing like that in Europe." He said it was important for people to have somewhere to go to "chill out with their family and friends". He mentioned nothing of the extraordinary reversal his forces were suffering in Ukraine.

For all the macho posturing during his two decades in power, Putin is now delivering a masterclass in the weakness of strongman rule. His assault on Ukraine was poorly conceived and badly executed, predicated on magical thinking. He refused to believe that Ukraine was a real country, or that Ukrainians would offer any resistance. He expected Kyiv to fall within days, and imagined that he could subdue a country of 44 million people with only around 200,000 troops. There was either a colossal intelligence failure prior ▸

◂ to the invasion or a failure to send accurate intelligence up the chain of command. In any case, this reflects the system Putin has created, and the responsibility for these failures is his.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the decade of economic turbulence that followed, Putin came to power at the turn of the millennium vowing to restore stability and national pride. He promised to put an end to the "disintegration of Russia" and to make the country great again. Aided by surging oil prices and a booming economy during his first two terms, with salaries and pensions finally being paid on time, the new president appeared to be fulfilling his promises.

Putin also showed no compunction about the use of military force. While Western leaders such as Tony Blair initially praised Putin and suggested he might prove to be a reformer, he launched a brutal campaign to quell the separatist rebellion in Chechnya, levelling the regional capital Grozny and causing heavy civilian casualties. The lesson Putin appears to have taken from this and later campaigns, from the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 to the military takeover of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, is that violence works.

Yet as Putin has consolidated and personalised power in Russia over the past 22 years, casting himself as the architect of the country's success, he has built a system that values loyalty over competence. This is an essential quality for ensuring regime security, but it is far from an effective method of governance, or for prosecuting a war. Beyond the performative displays of leadership on television and the talk of his vaunted "power vertical", which he uses to rule, Putin presides over a corrupt, dysfunctional bureaucracy and an inner circle of oligarchs and officials who compete for his favour and the opportunities for enrichment that follow.

The Russian singer Alla Pugacheva has urged Putin to put an "end to the death of our boys"

If the consequences were not so terrible, it would be almost comical how much of a cliché Putin has become as he conforms to the stereotype of the ageing autocrat. Isolated in his gilded quarters, he rails against his enemies and obsesses over his place in history. He has long since confused his own interests with those of his country, and he cannot find a successor who can be trusted not to turn on him, so he stays on, marinating in his grievances.

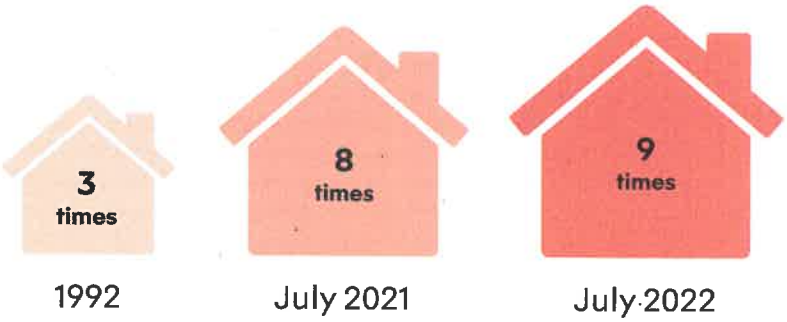
Perhaps his generals and intelligence officials had convinced themselves that Putin was right – that Ukrainians and Russians were "one people", as he had written in 2021 – and that the offensive in Ukraine would be short and victorious. Or perhaps no one wanted to tell the leader that his judgement, and his confidence in the Russian military, was wrong. When Boris Bondarev, a mid-ranking diplomat at Russia's United Nations mission in Geneva, resigned in May, he delivered a withering assessment of the Kremlin's preparations for the war and the system that had enabled it. "They got Ukraine wrong, they got the West wrong, they got everything wrong," he told the *New York Times*. "We diplomats of the Foreign Ministry are also at fault for not passing along the information that we should have – for presenting it as though everything was great." The main criterion for sending information to Moscow, he said, was that it was "certain to be liked".

There is no reason to believe that this situation will improve with Russia's recent failures in Ukraine. If anything, Putin's lieutenants will be even more determined to save themselves and divert the blame towards other parts of the intelligence apparatus, other commanders and the West. Meanwhile, the chorus of disapproval from Russian nationalists on social media has intensified, as they urge Putin to escalate his offensive and declare a state of war and full national mobilisation. At the same time, Alla Pugacheva, one of Russia's most famous singers, has urged Putin to put an "end to the death of our boys for illusory ends" as domestic criticism of the conflict mounts.

It is clear to international observers – and some Russian commentators – that Russia cannot win on the battlefield. But this does not mean that Putin will accept a Russian defeat. In June he compared himself to the 18th-century Russian emperor Peter the Great and invoked his Great Northern War against Sweden, which lasted for 21 years, insisting that he too was fighting to "return" land that rightfully belonged to Russia. The following month he warned that his offensive in Ukraine was only just getting started. It is always possible that the recent Russian losses will cause Putin to reassess his approach, but the likely outcome is more of the same. He will order his forces to regroup, adjust their objectives, target more civilian infrastructure, and grind on at the cost of countless Ukrainian and Russian lives, and perhaps his own political future. Meanwhile, those around him assure him that he is right. ●

Chart of the Week

Housing has never been so unaffordable
The average UK house price compared to average annual earnings



SOURCE: ONS

The Diary

Mourners in Westminster, sweet treats in Soho, and shedding a tear for the Queen

By Howard Jacobson

I could easily have been mistaken for the poet William Blake last week, wandering through the chartered streets of London marking in every face I met, marks of weakness, marks of woe. In truth, a less exalted song than Blake's was going through my head as I dodged the mourners and melancholics, the royal tyre-kickers, the flower-layers and my own feelings: Burl Ives sorrowfully admitting that "A little bitty tear let me down/Spoiled my act as a clown".

Why was I so perilously close to shedding a little bitty tear myself? Yes, my mother died recently at pretty much the same age as the Queen. But that wasn't it: I know the difference between the Queen and my mother. The contagion of crowds could have played a part. Tears are catching, especially when that old devil patriotism worms its way into them. You go out walking, hear a bell toll, read a soppy message on a bunch of roses and the next thing you're crying because everybody else is. "Oceanic" Freud called it.

But that would have accounted for only half a bitty tear. Something else had to explain the peculiarly personal poignancy felt in the days following the Queen's surcease. Other than the sense of dread and solemnity on the streets; other than the warning death was giving that no one was beyond its reach; other than *lacrimae rerum* – the tears waiting at the heart of things – what was it?

I run into an actor friend, and we hug in the pale autumnal sunshine

Last night in Soho

Meanwhile Soho is coming back to life after the closures caused by the pandemic. The latest addition is an ice cream shop that is illuminated like a nightclub. Come at it in the dark, a little the worse for wear, and you think you've stumbled on Xanadu at last, the pleasure dome that will fulfil all your wildest desires, as indeed it will if all your wildest desires come in cones. Two doors down, a patisserie specialising in eclairs the colours of the Ukrainian flag and super-wet Bratislavan-looking dulce de leche has reopened at twice the size it was. Opposite is a baby-pink fairy bower for taking tea and selfies in.

No, this is not the authentic Soho, where old men wandered the streets jiggling their coin trays and looking up through rheumy eyes at windows lit by a single naked red bulb. But at least it's open again. Mortal sin changes, I suppose that's all one can say. One age chooses to die venereally, another with bad teeth.

Incredible scenes

Should parliament ever open again, will someone please pass legislation to criminalise the word "incredibly" when used to mean "very"? Or even, as when employed by Liz Truss, to mean "not much at all"? I, for one, will be gargantuanly grateful.

At a house-leaving party thrown by my one-time publisher and his wife who want to spend more time on the coast. What can you say to people who think like that? I'll still meet him for incredibly commiserative writerly lunches in old Soho but it's sad to say goodbye to a house where several books of mine were launched. Not that book launches are what they were. Publishers no longer splash out on cheese and crackers unless you're a fantasy writer or Prince Harry, and even his coming memoir won't justify a spread if he keeps up this family reconciliation malarkey. Who wants to read a book about brothers getting on?

The curtain falls

Off to the lovely Queen's Park Book Festival – one of the few that can draw audiences in London – and always a pleasure because it feels like a garden party with people who read. While there, I run into an actor friend who did an incredibly good Macbeth in the back room of an incredible pub in Islington.

"The Queen, my Lord, is dead," I say to him. "Life's but a walking shadow," he replies. "A poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/And then is heard no more." We hug in the pale autumnal sunshine and then I realise he has explained my little bitty tear. Art can be sadder than life because it compresses the tragedy of existence, from start to finish, into five short acts or one short tale. Thus the Queen – a little girl playing with her sister in Sandringham, a young woman bowing her head in Westminster Abbey, a widow weeping for her husband, and now – puff! –the curtain falls and she is gone. A life over almost before it started, while we sit in the dress circle and watch. Walking shadows are all any of us are. I remain hugging my actor friend and let the tears flow. ●

Howard Jacobson's memoir "Mother's Boy: A Writer's Beginnings" is published by Jonathan Cape

HANNA-KATRINA JĘDROSZ FOR THE NEW STATESMAN

Encounter

"This could be our last century on Earth"

Martin Rees on the threats facing humanity

By Harry Lambert

Travelling to meet Martin Rees feels for me like travelling to meet a member of a mythical council of elders, or any such body of the wise that children imagine looks over and after the world. Rees, 80, who has been the Astronomer Royal since 1995, has the calm, open temperament of a man made to answer the fundamental questions of space, time and the universe.

We met at Trinity College, Cambridge, the academic home of Isaac Newton and 34 of Cambridge University's 121 Nobel Prize winners. Trinity is the kind of college where Rees could, over a buffet lunch in the grand hall, casually identify a Fields Medallist among the fellows seated nearby. A portrait of Rees, who was master of the college from 2004 to 2012, hangs in Trinity's Great Hall. Another, in the National Portrait Gallery in London, captures him best: gazing out of shot, with a Newtonian apple placed on the desk beside him, he appears amused, inquisitive and wry – as he is in person. But his views are disquieting.

"This century is a special one," Rees believes, as it may be the one "where we as humans destroy ourselves". That seems dire. "It is dire. We have a bumpy road through this century." The risks, he thinks, are myriad, from our over-dependence on technology that could break down or be misused ("suppose the internet had failed during the pandemic") to the

exaggerated voice of extremists on social media: "It's more durable than Trump. It's an issue that's going to coarsen our political discourse, and I don't see quite how we're going to get away from that." The world is getting harder to govern.

It is also difficult to observe improvements in human nature over time, Rees thinks. "Although our lives are better than those of our Middle Ages and medieval forebears, the evidence for the lack of ethical progress is that the gap between the way the world is and the way it could be is wider now than it was then – and it will get wider still."

Isn't it depressing, I asked, that progress will always be an illusion? "It is depressing," he replied, while sounding far from depressed. He seemed too buoyed by knowledge to be deflated by fact.

This century is not only the one in which we have an ever greater capacity to destroy ourselves; it is also the first in which we will be able to alter what it means to be human. After 45 centuries on Earth, humans seem likely to "transition from flesh and blood towards electronic entities", as Rees puts it. And we can, as he wrote in *On The Future* (2018), "have zero confidence that the dominant intelligences a few centuries hence" – whether transhuman or a form of artificial general intelligence – "will have any emotional resonance with us".

The realisation that dawns on you, as you talk to Rees, is how primitive humanity is as a form of intelligent development. We will, as a species, be long forgotten in the cosmic future. "The future is at least as long as the past," he said (so long as we avoid extinction). "We may not," given the age of the sun, "even be at the halfway stage in the emergence of complexity. And when the sun dies, the entities watching that will be as different from us as we are from a bug."

Rees appears to accept that all life must end, when many others do not. "Well we have to, don't we?" he says with a smile. But some tech utopians dream of their intelligence being "uploaded to the cloud", free of mortal bounds. How realistic is that proposition? "I think the question is, to what extent is it still going to be you? Because we are linked to our bodies and they could make multiple clones of this electronic thing, so which one is going to be you?"

Rees – who came up to Cambridge to study mathematics more than 60 years ago, having grown up as the only child of two teachers – still lives an active life. He comes into college and he writes books (his latest, *If Science is To Save Us*, is out in November). He lives in Cambridge with his wife of 36 years, an anthropologist. He has long lived with a slightly curved spine that gives him a stoop but robs him of none of his zest. He served as president of the Royal Society from 2005 to 2010, while master of Trinity. "If we could go on as we are now," he said of himself and those in good health, "I think we'd be very happy for a few hundred years."

Yet time is passing. As a theoretical physicist, the notion of time is a subject of debate for Rees, but he does not doubt its constraints. "Some physicists argue that space and time are not the most fundamental things, and that they are constructed from something still more fundamental – so at that very deep level, you may say that time is not a fundamental quantity. But that's like saying that a lump of sugar isn't fundamental because we could break it down into atoms and crystals. That doesn't make time, or the lump of sugar, any less real."

The question of what to investigate is the central one for any scientist. As a younger man, as he studied the origins of the universe and the nature of black holes, Rees worked alongside the great physicists of our age, from Stephen Hawking to Roger Penrose. "We can now," he said, "go back to the first microsecond of the universe with as much confidence as a geologist has in talking about the early history of the Earth." But the first microsecond is critical. "Many of the key features of the universe – why it's expanding, how big it is, why it contains atoms and radiation and dark matter – the answers lie in this first microsecond."

Little is understood about that first microsecond. It is, Rees said, a question of "trying to guess what the physics might be like" as the conditions would have been "far more extreme than anything for which we have a foothold in experiment". This uncertainty has left space for striking theories about that first moment, such as the idea there have been many big bangs, rather than just one. Yet "many features of reality", Rees warned, "are going to remain a mystery, because our brains aren't up to it".

Rees worked in Albert Einstein's wake as a cosmologist, but, unlike Einstein, he has diversified away from astrophysics in his later years. "Einstein realised that the obvious step" after postulating the theory of relativity "was to unify the forces of gravity with the other forces we knew about – electricity and magnetism, and the forces that hold atomic nuclei together – and he tried to do this. It's what people are working on now, but in his time, it was certainly a hopeless quest, because not enough was known about the forces."

Wary of a hopeless quest, Rees has instead increasingly turned his attention to the state of society. And it is our politics, rather than our inevitable end, that exasperates him. His new book explores the possibility of scientific advance saving society, but he knows that society cannot be saved from short-termist politicians.

Rees is particularly discouraged by recent Tory ministers, describing Boris Johnson's government as "the worst" in his lifetime. "Conditions for the average person have got worse in the last 20 years," he told me. Pay has fallen, work is more insecure, trade unions have long lost their strength. "We've gone in the wrong direction. It's clear that the National Health Service is worse than it used to be. New Labour did many good things – Sure Start and [initiatives] of that kind, which the Tories then cut. I just feel the inequalities [today] are really grossly excessive."

Martin Rees would like to see "an increase in social services and an increase in taxes on the wealthy" to pay for them. He describes himself as "Old Labour". What does he mean by that? "In one sentence: to learn more from Scandinavia than from the US."

After 45 centuries on the planet, humans seem likely to "transition from flesh and blood towards electronic entities"

Why decarbonisation is key for energy security The current crisis shows we need a just and speedy net zero transition

By Kayte O'Neill

In partnership with nationalgridESO

The scale of the current energy and cost-of-living crisis is unprecedented. Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine has caused the price of gas and electricity to skyrocket. Energy bills have risen rapidly, with many domestic and business consumers struggling to pay their bills and facing extremely difficult decisions this coming winter.

The government's recent announcement of a temporary energy price cap freeze will prevent the average dual fuel bill rising to over £5,000 per year – which would be catastrophic for many consumers – but it still represents a 150 per cent increase from 2021.

The planned fiscal policy measures can reduce economic pain for some for the time being, but Great Britain must not lose sight of the long-term opportunity presented through decarbonisation and the transition to renewable energy.

As the electricity system operator (ESO) for Great Britain, we are working with the government and industry to build a net zero electricity system that is clean, reliable and fair for all. This is a national challenge that is central to building an energy-secure future, where families and businesses can power their homes affordably and the benefits of green investment can be felt across Great Britain.

Building a cleaner future

Our electricity system is no longer solely powered by a few, large coal and gas-fired power stations. The energy mix is now far more varied, and zero-carbon sources play a major role in powering Great Britain every day.

Despite the progress towards decarbonisation, our energy security is still underpinned by natural gas. This is because when the wind doesn't blow and the sun doesn't shine, natural gas is often burned in its place to generate the electricity required to meet demand. Additionally, the spinning parts of gas turbines also act as shock absorbers for the electricity system, stabilising it by slowing changes in system frequency when generators lose power.

This dual reliance on gas leaves Great Britain vulnerable to sudden shocks in global gas prices – brutally evidenced throughout this year. To build a secure, clean and affordable energy system, Great Britain's long-term reliance on natural gas needs to be reduced.

The ESO operates one of the fastest decarbonising electricity systems in the world and we are building towards carbon-free operation of the system for periods of time by 2025 and then all of the time by 2035. To do this, we're using

Pant-y-Wal Wind Farm near Mynydd William Meyrick, Bridgend, South Wales, UK

OENZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

first-of-a-kind technologies that can deliver the system stability traditionally provided by fossil fuel power plants and creating new markets that will continue to keep a highly renewable energy-led electricity system balanced.

Integrating fairness, lowering costs

In today's wholesale electricity market, all electricity producers receive the same price for their generation, regardless of how much it costs to generate it and how far that electricity must travel. This means that consumers are missing out on cheaper energy at a time when they most need it. Current wholesale market arrangements will not deliver net zero in the most efficient way or at best value to the consumer.

Our Net Zero Market Reform programme proposes new electricity market design options to support decarbonisation, to send the right signals to investors and to reduce costs for consumers. These arrangements would ensure that generators receive a fair price that truly reflects their costs of producing electricity, lowering prices for consumers across the UK.

Delivering investment in net zero to rebalance GB economy

The transition to a net zero electricity system is a huge opportunity to secure investment in local communities across the length and breadth of the country. Earlier this year we produced a report showing how the government's ambition of 50GW of offshore wind by 2030 can be achieved and the economic opportunity it presents. This involves securing the connection of an additional 23GW on top of the existing offshore wind pipeline, which could add £54bn to the GB economy and secure nearly 170,000 jobs by 2030. These jobs would be spread over multiple regions across the UK, helping to reinvigorate coastal communities and areas where existing skills bases can be transitioned to benefit from net zero.

The current energy crisis leaves Great Britain with historic decisions to make. The requirement for short-term fiscal intervention is clear but we must not fall short of achieving the transition away from natural gas in the longer term.

The challenges in front of consumers, industry and the government should be used to catalyse the collective effort to create a cleaner, more reliable and fairer energy system. The ESO is proud to play a part in that journey. ●

Kayte O'Neill is director of transformation at National Grid Electricity System Operator

CORRESPONDENCE

letters@newstatesman.co.uk

Letter of the week

New model monarch

Andrew Marr (Politics, 16 September) says we are "being carried along rather fast". Indeed we are. And no doubt other republicans like myself feel somewhat isolated. Sound, thoughtful arguments for an alternative to the monarchy, or at the very least a slimmed-down version, are hard to find.

But if the new king is genuinely for reform, then why doesn't he do the following:

1) Live in one pleasant house (possibly two) and relinquish the other royal houses and palaces to the nation. Perhaps the National Trust could take responsibility and Crown wealth could be taxed to maintain them and keep entrance fees to a minimum. Royalists and others can then have a good peep.

2) Pay tax, and at a handsome rate. That must include paying inheritance tax, like his subjects.

3) Accept that royalty is simply not sustainable into the future and that, after his death and following an extensive constitutional convention, a new, modern, democratic alternative will replace it.

Jol Miskin, Sheffield

President and correct

Andrew Marr (Politics, 16 September) bravely argues that, absurd as it might be intellectually, now is not the time to challenge the monarchy. Rowan Williams, perhaps unwittingly, puts his finger on the other issue (Another Voice, 16 September) when he presents the monarch as a parent figure. Indeed, the monarchy infantilises the populace. It is never too early to start discussing how we might all grow up.

Jim Young, Halesworth, Suffolk

Richard Evans provides us with a timely and wise reminder that "where elected but powerless individuals have been head of state, it is clear that republicanism is no guarantee of success" ("The sense of an ending", 16 September), but the only example offered is the Federal Republic of Germany. The island of Ireland is another interesting comparison. The Republic has had nine presidents exercising largely apolitical roles without controversy, and the two female incumbents, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, have distinguished themselves on the international stage. In the North, affection for the Queen notwithstanding, devotion to the monarchy has been dangerously divisive.

Paul Thomson, Mobberley, Cheshire

A fitting tribute

I read Simon Armitage's poem "Floral Tribute" (16 September) with distinct pleasure, because in its delicate depiction of a beautiful but hardy flower it somehow summed up the Queen's resolution to do her duty and serve her country, while always maintaining a light touch and an elegant, regal presence.

This poet has a way of not over-egging the royal poem. His tribute to the Duke of Edinburgh, too, was a memorable but not obsequious paean to royalty. Armitage lives up and more to the title of poet laureate.

Judith A Daniels, Cobholm, Norfolk

The lure of first-past-the-post

John Gray's essay ("The coming autumn crisis", 9 September) contained a common but flawed assumption – that a Labour-led coalition would alter the voting system to make a "Tory majority government practically impossible". While I'm pro electoral reform, it's not Labour policy and the party will not want to lock itself out of a majority either, especially if parliamentary arithmetic leaves one within touching distance. Isn't it more likely that a Labour-led coalition would either kick the issue into the long grass, as Tony Blair did, or follow David Cameron by granting a referendum on the issue and coming out against change?

James McSweeney, Stevenage, Herts

Contested Corbynism

Lola Seaton claims Corbynism helped to fracture what Mark Fisher described as "capitalist realism" and thereby make it possible to "imagine a coherent alternative" to the status quo (The Critics, 9 September). A rather different view has recently been expressed by Liz Truss of young people in Britain as a generation of "Uber-riding, Airbnb-ing, Deliveroo-eating freedom fighters".

Mark Fisher was an original and unorthodox thinker who would have dismissed Truss's "freedom fighting" remark as utter baloney. But the idea that the prevailing capitalist order was successfully "fractured" between 2015 and 2020 also looks like yet another example of the wishful thinking the left is so prone to.

Ivor Morgan, Lincoln

Lola Seaton notes that 90,000 people discontinued their Labour Party membership in 2021, after numbers rose sharply during Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, but the idea that a drop-off in party members is disastrous should not be left unchallenged.

Keir Starmer is making headway in getting Labour to show it understands the overwhelming majority who don't make direct debit payments to a political party. If parts of the left still don't realise why that is so vital, then it appears the true lessons of Corbynism remain undiscovered to them.
Colton Richards, West Sussex

Action for doomed youth

Tomiwa Owolade (These Times, 9 September) is right: the establishment has "failed to uphold its side of the bargain" for the young. But the young need to acknowledge the injustice they face – with the climate emergency, low pay, high rent, and the lack of career opportunities – and organise their time effectively enough to threaten the ruling classes' reluctance to address the issues that matter. Protests, votes, petitions, letters and strikes do eventually make a difference.
Sebastian Monblat, Surbiton, Greater London

"Space" exploration

I am inspired by Amelia Tait's vision (Out of the Ordinary, 9 September) for free public "space". That it seems fantastical shows the reality of today's Britain, where halting the privatisation of our public realm seems impossible. Of perhaps even greater concern is the future for those of us who, through schemes such as the Community Asset Transfer programme, have been given "space". As energy bills rise over the coming months, these civic spaces could become poisoned inheritances. Safeguarding these assets' futures, as warm hubs or otherwise, must be top of the list for Ms Truss.
Amy Foster, London SE25

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TOM CHITTY

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

By Kevin Maguire

Normal political hostilities returned swiftly after a ten-day pause following the Queen's death – and so too did the gloominess of some Conservative MPs. After Brexit convert Liz Truss admitted on a flight to New York that a trade deal with the US won't be happening any time soon, one Tory former cabinet minister confided in me that he expected Keir Starmer to be the UK's next premier. "We don't want a Labour government in hock to the SNP," he sniffed, "which means it would be better if we lost big."

Speaking of the young republican turned middle-aged monarchist, Starmer decreeing that "God Save the King" would be sung at Labour's conference in Liverpool has terrified members of the shadow cabinet. The leader's lieutenants fear TV footage of empty seats, Jeremy Corbyn's unmoving lips, and the bellowing of alternative republican lyrics. "Labour's a party of roundheads, not royalist cavaliers," wailed my snout. "The *Mail* and *Telegraph* can't believe their luck." The informant added front-bench comrades will be learning the words to avoid the fate of John Redwood, who as Welsh secretary in 1993 was mercilessly mocked for miming along to the national anthem of Wales.

Liz Truss's new chief economic adviser, Matthew Sinclair, is the latest graduate of the TaxPayers' Alliance to jump on to the state payroll. The former head of the right-wing organisation, which routinely smears public spending, seems to display no compunction when it comes to personally pocketing taxpayers' money as a government staffer. Sinclair joining a public sector he has repeatedly attacked is the Trussonomics version of Boris Johnson's cakeism.

Tory ecologist Zac Goldsmith lost the green half of his own government role – as a minister with responsibilities for both the UK environment and foreign affairs – over, I'm told, bad blood with the new farming, fisheries and food secretary, Mark Spencer. A personality clash between the Nottinghamshire farmer MP and the wealthy west London peer has sparked, I am informed, fears of departmental paralysis. "Spencer thinks Goldsmith's a dilettante and Goldsmith that Spencer's lot poison the land," growled my source. "It would've been like putting two bulls in a field."

An enduring Disney-esque touch in the House of Commons is the loops of pink ribbon, originally used to hang swords from coat pegs, in the members' cloakroom. Cheeky MPs often use them to dangle toy weapons and other joke items – among them a wooden implement used in the hockey-like Highland game of shinty, owned by the Liberal Democrat chief whip, Wendy Chamberlain. Woe betide any Lib Dumb who incurs the wrath of the Scottish former police officer. She speaks softly and carries a big stick.

"We don't want a Labour government in hock to the SNP," said one former Tory minister, "so it will be better if we lose big"

Kevin Maguire is the associate editor (politics) of the Daily Mirror

Going for broke

As Liz Truss's radical right-wing government gambles on economic growth, Labour needs to be the party of prudence and reassurance – and learn the lessons of the Queue

By Andrew Marr

Trust your emotional reaction. I was moved less by the historical sonorities and the crisp military discipline of the Queen's funeral, than by the quiet, serious, warmly community-minded atmosphere of the famous Queue. That's the memory that will last. Ordinary faces, honourably grieving. The centripetal instinct: different backgrounds and ages, drawn from across the country, together by choice.

In our individualist culture, this month reminded us of the rival truth, our human need to be part of something bigger. The Queen's death and the days that followed allowed that rare and valuable experience – the feeling of oneness.

I know there's a large minority who felt none of this, who were indifferent, baffled or even hostile. I am no monarchist myself. But what follows is a first attempt to guess some of the political implications of the days that have shaken the country. If you think that's irrelevant then the following is not for you.

The death of the Queen and the arrival of King Charles III provoked saturation coverage of an uncritical, adulatory temper that, we must assume, will itself produce a mildly pro-establishment, pro-conservative shift. But this may not last long, nor will it inevitably help the Tories. The notion of us being "all in it together" is not exactly at the core of the Truss government's project.

Liz Truss herself is an attacking, aggressive politician. As politics restarts, won't the brief, patriotic and consensual lull make full-throttle chainsaw hostility – as Truss and her cabinet launch themselves at Keir Starmer, who has been eloquent and dignified – seem grindingly unattractive?

I don't know. Never in our democratic history has the British state experienced so much change so quickly – therefore every prediction must come hedged with caution.

The fundamentals, however, have not changed. We still have a state-sceptic administration at a time when the country needs and yearns for good government. It takes a lot of gold leaf and royal grief to move the political dial at all. We will now see, only a few weeks later than expected, a radical right-wing government emerging in plain sight and moving fast, with none of its sharp edges softened.

Truss is focused on winning the 2024 general election. "Seven years, not two," is the mantra in Downing Street according to a No 10 adviser. To have a chance she must do two things. With the emergency energy support package she must reassure families and businesses that they can make it through the winter. Then, next year, she must somehow achieve growth so noticeable and cheering that middle-of-the-road voters forgive the bankers' bonuses, tax cuts for the rich, the ▸

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◂ fracking, and the prioritising of the purity of Brexit over the survival of British exporters.

Let's start with the relatively short-term. The government has announced its Energy Price Guarantee, which will ensure that households pay an average of £2,500 a year on their energy bill from October. Even with this policy, however, can the government avoid enacting a windfall tax on the profit surge of energy companies? This is a lottery bonus not caused by the faintest glimmer of shrewdness from management nor a single bead of sweat in those organisations.

Sticking tight means the government has almost no defence against opposition demands for higher spending elsewhere. That's remarkable. The new chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng's enthusiasm for cutting taxes for the better off, and refusing to hit corporate profits, gives Labour almost perfect framing, directing voters' attention to an untouched pot of money.

Then there's that unavoidable question of who pays for the emergency support. If we are into the economics of high borrowing, higher interest rates, and a lower pound that imports yet more inflation, the answer is: all of us. This central issue will not be adjudicated by the party system, but by international finance, which will make a simple, brutal judgement about the credibility of the new government. Right now, ministers are even more worried about the pound than they are about the Labour Party.

Next, will the new package do the job it's designed for? Given food inflation, and historically high heating bills despite the energy cap, can the Truss policy avoid widespread misery and bankruptcies, even after huge spending and borrowing?

This takes us to the second, longer-term political fight. The Truss strategy is, essentially, go for bust; to borrow, and slash taxes to get surprisingly fast growth. It's a hell-for-leather, don't-spare-the-horses politics. Historically minded folk will cast straight back to the Barber boom of 1971-74. During that period, Edward Heath's radical, war-hero chancellor, Anthony Barber, reduced taxes and stated that his Budget would add 10 per cent to the UK's growth in two years, but it all ended badly as inflation took fierce hold and the Tory government lost its grip on the country, and indeed on power.

Replaying the story is, to put it gently, a courageous play. It certainly isn't Thatcherism. But who knows? The currency and labour markets, and indeed the structure of the British economy, were very different then: none of us can be sure how, second time around, this will play out.

The Tory gamble is that if there is real growth in two years' time, voters, feeling more optimistic about their personal prospects, will forgive everything. In some ways it's refreshing, after the endless cakeism, the fudges and U-turns, of the Johnson years, to have ministers who are bold enough to endure short-term unpopularity in pursuit of a clear, ideological agenda.

The result, however, is that not for decades has Labour found itself so well-placed as the party of prudence and reassurance. Keir Starmer is pleased that a period of cartoonish personality politics has terminated alongside Boris Johnson's premiership, and that we are now into serious political debate of a kind we had almost left behind. The intense exchanges in the House of Commons between him and Truss were at their most interesting even as notes were being passed around the chamber reporting the Queen's illness.

In this new atmosphere, it doesn't matter so much that Starmer is not naturally charismatic. But there are elephant traps ahead; and a huge task of sharpening political arguments.

One strategic puzzle is how to speak for the seething distress and growing militancy of a disintegrating society, while at the same time offering reassurance to the middling, nervous voters of what I call Lidl England. Is it possible to be the insurgent and the conciliator at the same time?

There is an opportunity for Starmer here, exposed by the period of royal mourning. He needs to emphasise the majority, decent, ordinary community that recognised itself on the streets this September. For sure, as many senior Labour people say in private, he needs to loosen up, to stop trying to chastise colleagues who want to appear on picket lines, and to welcome, rather than flinch from, passionate rhetoric.

But to solve the puzzle, Starmer needs to challenge the country directly as well. He needs to ask whether an ideological economics that focuses on the richest, and that borrows for a short, sugar-rush spurt of growth, is a proper response to a national community that is suffering. A King who spent so much time establishing his Prince's Trust, which he founded in 1976 to help disadvantaged young people, is likely to be a man receptive to such a message.

This is a rare moment when Labour can seize the cause of progressive patriotism. If singing "God save the King" at the start of the Labour Party Conference seems going for it a bit, then Paris is worth a mass. There is almost no time left to get the rhetoric right. We are now into a period of relentless, pre-election advocacy. Truss and her team are ready for it. Starmer, whose private office has been so far too protective and defensive of him, must now be making his case, every single day, on every single outlet, never letting up.

The best strategy is to concentrate on specific failures: the under-invested utilities, failing schools, court systems, A&E departments, and a police force struggling to cope. Economic growth must be a Labour promise too, but growth for all; growth that doesn't leave half the country behind.

In terms of specific policy, Starmer will soon need to be bolder about the European question. As Truss confronts the Biden problem over the Northern Ireland protocol, and tries to make it up to a French president who has gone so far out of his way to be friendly, how can the opposition not start saying the obvious about our relations with the outside world? If "going for growth" is the centrepiece of Tory thinking, is it sensible that Labour stays mute about the impact of Brexit regulations on exporters and employment?

On nationalisation, Starmer will at least have to acknowledge the case for temporary measures during the fuel crisis. Then there is the voting system, the structures of power, centralisation and the rest. "For the first time in a dozen years, I feel we are within touching point of forming a Labour-led government," says one senior party figure. But it is, still, so far, Labour-led, not Labour. Conversations have to begin, however privately, with other opposition parties. The apparent determination of the new government to ditch net zero and "green crap" in pursuit of growth – something the King will loathe – gives Labour a great opportunity to expand its appeal.

So much ahead, so little time. Keir Starmer's model must be the great Labour leaders who looked and sounded reticent and conservative, but who unleashed substantive changes, such as Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson. He can do this, and there is a mood change in the country, which helps. If there is one piece of advice Labour should heed after recent weeks it's this: forget the pomp if you like. But remember, for God's sake, the Queue. ●

ANDREW EVANS

"Charles, is that really necessary?"

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GERARD LYONS

Another Voice

The meaning of Trussonomics: prevent a deep recession, then close the funding gap

Since I began reading the *New Statesman* in September 1979 some recurring themes have been evident in discussion of the UK economy, such as the need for more investment. Another is for fiscal policy to be used more proactively in delivering growth, and not to obsess over the budget deficit, especially when times are tough, as they are today. It is interesting to note these figure prominently in Liz Truss's plans for Britain.

Her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, has told the Treasury to adopt a pro-growth strategy. That's good. The Treasury occupies roles that in other countries are split across government departments. In the UK its role as a finance function supersedes its aim to foster growth.

While all governments may want higher growth, the reality is that few put in place the necessary incentives to achieve it. Kwarteng is not calling for a "go for growth" policy that we have seen before, where the attention is solely on boosting demand. Instead, the focus is on the supply side to boost investment and empower the private sector. It will be unashamedly pro-growth and pro-business. If they cut income taxes, re-index tax allowances to increase in line with inflation, and lower marginal rates of tax, it will be pro-workers, too.

I thought it positive that the immediate policy aim was to prevent a deep recession and protect jobs by fixing energy prices and reversing planned tax increases. Next the challenge is to raise trend growth. I see three features.

One is a supply-side agenda to boost investment, encourage innovation, fund infrastructure and to get incentives right, through smart regulation and low taxes. For example, the UK has £6trn in pension and insurance assets, among others, but not enough of this capital pool is invested in long-term productive investment. This is where reform of Solvency II and other regulations can make a difference.

Low taxes are a key part of the plan, but not all of it. They are important for rewarding work and encouraging firms to be based in the UK and to invest.

Politicians often call for a deregulation agenda, yet it does not materialise. It is important to challenge the mindset that regulation is costless. When it comes to the City, an immediate focus of policy, there is an opportunity outside the EU to build a bespoke regulatory agenda for financial services. The aim is to ensure the City is competitive and that it finances UK firms to grow and invest. Amazingly, the Macmillan Gap, identified in 1931, still exists. This is the gap between the finance that firms need and what they receive. In 2019 the Bank of England said the funding gap for small and medium-sized firms was a huge £22bn.

The second pillar is sound public finances. Keynes would be turning in his grave at the UK's nonsensical fiscal rules. The only rule that merits retention is the one to ensure fiscal discipline: reducing the ratio of debt to GDP, steadily, over time.

Truss has clear fiscal principles: let people and firms keep more of their own money. In time, the debate will likely switch to controlling public expenditure and reforming services. Tax simplification, too, should be embraced – something the Federation of Small Business calls for.

> All governments want higher growth but few put the incentives in place to achieve it

Immediate fiscal easing is necessary to prevent recession. It is non-inflationary because of the nature of our inflation shock. This was triggered by supply-side factors, such as bottlenecks that arose from the pandemic, which were exacerbated by poor monetary policy, not triggered by an overheated domestic economy. And it is affordable: the government is able to borrow cheaply despite the rise in yields. The maturity of our debt, too, is long.

The government has to keep financial markets onside. The UK is not exempt from global trends, which show a strong dollar, and higher bond yields across Western economies. While markets are naturally wary of any new government, especially when rates are rising and debt is high, policy should avoid the biggest threat to the public finances – a deep recession.

The third pillar is low inflation and financial stability. With fiscal policy playing a more important role in stabilising the economy, we need to move away from the cheap money policy that has dominated since the 2008 crisis. It has led to asset price inflation, financial markets not pricing properly for risk, an inefficient allocation of capital and a fertile environment for current inflation to soar.

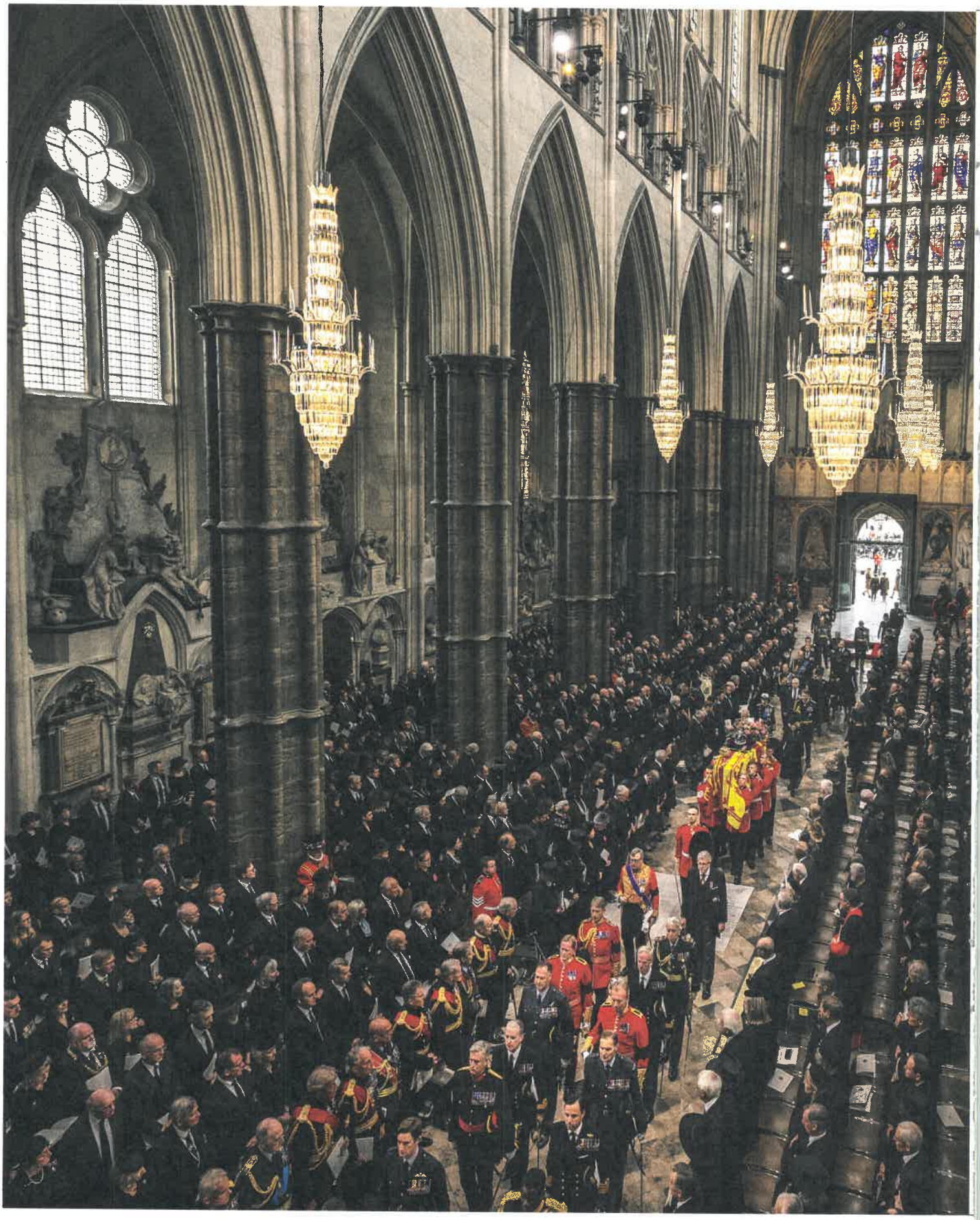
Last year monetary policy was eased when it should have been tightened. At that time, I highlighted the already evident inflation risk. The economy could have coped with tightening last year but is now far less able to do so. The Bank of England needs to tread carefully as it tightens policy.

Truss has been clear that the Bank will retain its independence to set interest rates. But she should be concerned about the Bank's self-inflicted credibility gap and poor communications. Hence a review of its remit, commonplace in other countries such as Canada, is long overdue. Diversity of thought, and of background, is needed at the Bank, where each of the four deputy governors used to work at the Treasury.

Liz Truss wants to turn around the Treasury orthodoxy that Britain is a low-growth economy where more of the budget deficit is structural, not cyclical. This thinking wrongly led the government to opt for austerity a decade ago, and Rishi Sunak to hike taxes. I welcome the shift to a pro-growth strategy. ●

Gerard Lyons is chief economic strategist at Netwealth

MARTA SIGNORI



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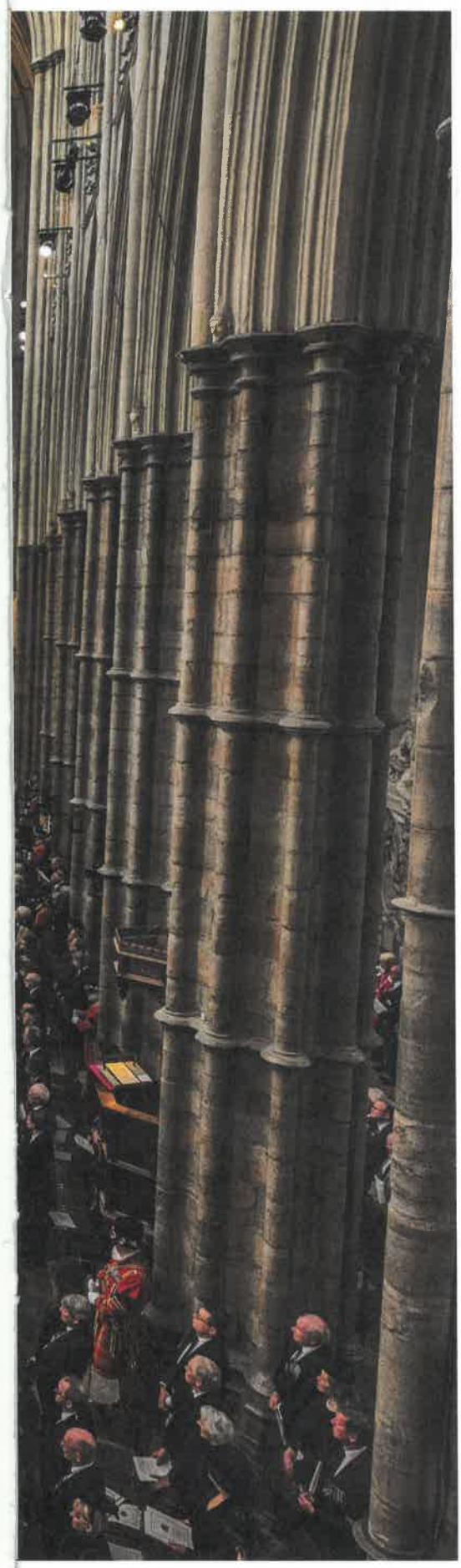

Reporter at Large

Mourning air

On the streets of London after the Queen's death, our writer found grief, apathy – and a startling sense of community

By Matthew Engel

Just after dawn on Friday 9 September, the day after the death before, I set out to fulfil my own obligations drawn up for this eventuality and took the train from my Herefordshire home to London.

The early morning silence prevailed until a gaggle of teenage girls got on and plonked themselves across the aisle. They talked for a while about teachers and make-up. And then they got stuck in to the subject.

"I was just making my chocolate when I heard the Queen had died."

"Oh my God," said one of her companions. "I was literally on the train and then she died."

"There was one bit that really made me cry. It showed her shaking hands with loads of people and she was getting older and older."

"The *Horrible Histories* song is out of date now," said another. "It's so sad. There was this double rainbow over Buckingham Palace or Big Ben or something."

"I heard Prince Philip and the Queen were cousins." "No they weren't... Hey Siri, were Prince Philip and the Queen related?" But the signal had gone and Siri refused to answer. They forgot about it and moved on, finally. But I felt I had already glimpsed a truth.

How were the British responding to an event unprecedented in the lifetime of seven-eighths of them? The end of a fixed point of their lives, a transformation of the context in which they lived. This moment was to provide the finish of a long-standing project of mine, to chronicle the life of Elizabeth II's Britain, an entity that died with her.

Through the prism of the traditional TV channels, if not the hundreds of alternatives now available, the country was in deep mourning. And so it might have been around the temporarily sacred sites that would flit in and out of the headlines over the next ten days – from Balmoral to, most improbably, Southwark Park. Everywhere else life more or less carried on. Shallow mourning.

That first Friday, central London bore some superficial signs of grief. At midday, the church bells tolled; at 1pm the guns reverberated from Hyde Park and the Tower. In Piccadilly Circus the huge adverts were replaced by a picture of the Queen five storeys high.

A few traditionally minded shops – the bookseller Hatchards, Selfridges and Liberty – closed for the day. Fortnum & Mason stopped its ornate clock. A few, a very few, blacked out their windows. And a dress shop in Knightsbridge made its own gesture by moving a selection of black outfits into the window, including a fetching, slightly low-cut number priced at £695. But far more shops were blacked out simply because their businesses had died.

The dozier foreign tourists who, with the slumping pound, dominate the West End streets more than ever, might not even have noticed anything was up. Unless Buckingham Palace was also on the day's itinerary.

Alongside the wall of the Palace gardens, the British were following the script and began to queue. By lunchtime the line stretched back towards Hyde Park Corner, though it still moved briskly. These were the flower people.

Young men who might only ever have carried flowers as hopeful lovers or to apologise to Mum held their bouquets without any hint of embarrassment. "Why have you come?" I asked an office worker from Dulwich. south London. "I dunno. I just thought I'd give her a send-off." Most of them, at this stage, had not come far but some, only 18 hours after the announcement, had made it from middle England. "It was my duty," said a man from Peterborough. "She was everyone's grandmother."

Everyone I met beside the wall lived in Britain. But what struck me was the large number of those who had acquired Britishness rather than had it thrust upon them. One Chinese woman from Essex had brought flowers from her own garden. Another Chinese couple, Benny and Amelia, had moved from the mainland to Hong Kong and then, when Chinese rule there got nastier, to Kew. "The British are not just one people," said Benny. "What they share is a belief in democracy." Their gratitude was practical, not just sentimental.

As the crowd swelled, the gaps in the railings in which to thrust the tributes were vanishing, the pace slowed, and finding somewhere – anywhere – to drop the flowers and move on became a major preoccupation, as if those offering bouquets were time-pressed delivery drivers.

Meanwhile, the tourists clung to the end of the Mall, hanging back as if sensing this was not their show. They huddled round the Victoria Memorial, the more daring clambering on to ledges to get a clearer view.

The tourists clung to the end of the Mall, hanging back as if sensing this was not their show

The flowers were now being dropped beneath Victoria's disdainful glare. Others were incongruously placed below the bare bum of her neighbour, the near-naked Progress statue. This was very different from the sombre formality that greeted George VI's death in 1952, when the crowd that gathered at the Palace did so wearing black. Tourists were rarities then, and it was February.

This time almost no one wore a black tie except the face-to-camera TV men, and indeed hardly anyone had a tie at all. It reminded me of the throng that gathered for William and Kate's wedding in 2011. I walked the streets that day, too, chatting and listening. They were mostly young, neither devoted royalists, one sensed, nor republicans. They scented history and wanted to be stakeholders. They might have turned out just the same if they had been given a holiday to mark the monarchy being overthrown.

Being there fulfils a yearning that has grown ever greater as more and more life is lived vicariously in front of screens. In 1946, the year before Elizabeth married Philip, Carson McCullers published a beautiful bittersweet novel called *The Member of the Wedding* about a troubled little girl desperate to have a part in something. Now, many Britons wanted to be members of the funeral.

By the next day, the first Saturday, with all the football postponed, orderliness had vanished. Green Park station was jammed, and then closed, because of the huge numbers of flower-carriers. Near the Palace, there was an impenetrable wall of humans and roadblocks.

St James's Park was now full of impromptu shrines underneath the plane trees. However, well below road level and far from the clogged entry points, there is a dip just by Victoria's statue but out of her line of sight, where a semicircular fountain with a serpent-mouthed spout dispenses water. There being no normal traffic, it would – but for the helicopters overhead – have been rustically peaceful.

There was no sign that officialdom was aware of this place, which held a couple of hundred bunches of unofficial roses, gladioli, freesias and whatever other flowers that might still have been unsold. There was more besides: the odd balloon, soft toys and letters addressed either to the late Queen or the new King. One woman had written at length about how she had glimpsed her on Derby day 2006. Here was the first sign of the Paddington Bear sub-cult, with children offering their drawings, their own Paddingtons and one full jar of Golden Shred marmalade. Many of those who stumbled on this spot stayed to take in its improbable aura of calm.

In rational terms, this seems absurd. Give

Mourning Her Majesty: spectators watch the Queen's funeral in London's Hyde Park; preceding page: the state funeral of Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey, 19 September

JOSE SARMENTO MATOS/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

the marmalade to a food bank, for heaven's sake. Let the kids keep their toys. There was certainly something medieval about this phenomenon, a remnant of the notion that the royal touch could cure scrofula. But beside that surprisingly serene fountain one felt something mystical – that the flower-bringers were meeting a profound human and spiritual need. And that there may be more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of those who scorn that.

That morning I had chosen a random London district and wandered round the very mixed streets of Acton, 25 minutes by Tube from Green Park, birthplace of Adam Faith, the Who and Waitrose (though they all left). Here too there was minimal evidence that Britain had suddenly passed a turning point of historic dimensions and global fascination.

I tried to eavesdrop and heard no one talking about the momentous news, still less than 36 hours old. Normal Londonish preoccupations held sway. Few flowers can have gone east from here: the only specialist florist was a casualty of Covid, and Morrisons was still well stocked.

The only sign that anything had happened was on an estate agents' door saying it would close an hour early as a mark of respect. It was the least they could do: unimpressive two-room flats in Acton are now being advertised at almost £700,000. This surpasses the rate of general price inflation more than twentyfold. In 1952, when Elizabeth became Queen, flats round here could be had for about £1,000. The agents should be lobbying for her to be canonised as the patron saint of their profession.

Yet monarchism was not dead. Getting a bit lost, I asked a woman with an Alsatian the way to the station. Then I asked her whether royalty was on her mind. Was it ever! Sandra O'Neill took out her phone and showed me her pride-and-joy photo. Aware that King Charles had landed at Northolt before travelling to the Palace, she went out to the A40 and saluted as he passed. "And he waved back! It was so lovely!"

So which was the real Britain? Far from London, in the pubs of Hereford, one of England's most traditional and stable cities, on the night she died, I heard no one talking about the Queen; TV sets tuned to continuous Huw Edwards went unwatched; conversations were about daily doings and football. Maybe there was not much to be said among family and friends, unless you were going to argue. A YouGov poll did report that 44 per cent of its sample said they "cried or welled up" in response to the Queen's death. Yet even in Herefordshire the queue that formed to see the lying-in-state provoked dark humour and disbelief. One night a young man yelled at the pub telly: "If that queue gets any longer they'll be able to see Charles there as well." One countrywoman told me the phenomenon constituted "mass hysteria".

By the following Saturday – 17 September, two days before the funeral – Piccadilly Circus had gone back to advertising Hugo Boss, Samsung and Tommy Hilfiger. The icons of British retailing, John Lewis and M&S, had black drapery in the windows. Ted Baker on Regent Street went postmodern and cleared the display for a marmalade sandwich and attendant corgi. Otherwise, the shoppers of the world kept calm and carried on. This was a far cry from the sombreness of 1952.

But in the parks it was a different story. The authorities had seized control of the situation and made it far worse, with distant police chiefs issuing ridiculous instructions to befuddled security personnel on the ground. At one stage people in St James's Park were effectively kettled inside the park because "too many people are trying to get in".

Most of the flowers had also been kettled into an area of Green Park behind one of the many sets of high fences. Officials belatedly stripped them of their plastic wrapping so they could be composted after being piled into a huge maze, surrounded by outlying floral islands shaped like ancient burial mounds. The intervening grass was trampled and the blooms were dying. Sunflowers had become predominant but, deprived of sun, were in mourning for themselves. The whole mass floral grave was imitating the Queen's life cycle, but in about 96 hours rather than 96 years.

I escaped eventually to inspect once obscure Southwark Park, where the long queue for Westminster Hall was beginning the last full all-nighter. The aspirant queuers were being corralled into the first of the now notorious zigzag barriers, which entailed walking a mile and a half to cover about 200 yards to the park gate. It was a good place to chat to a few of the supposed hysterics: the crowd was multiracial (but again, everyone I met lived in the UK) and of all ages. There was Sohail, taking refuge in Britain from Pakistan with his 16-month-old son snug in his pram. Along the way I was handed a purple wristband and failed to resist.

It was just after 7pm – estimated walking time 12 hours for a notional two-hour stroll. I opted out at the first way station, the Angel pub by the riverside at Rotherhithe, to meet my most urgent need: a large gin and tonic. Crucially, it was served in a disposable cup. So, gin in hand, I rejoined the marchers, then chatted a bit more. And eventually a mad idea took shape: shall I just keep going?

As darkness fell over the Thames, London had never looked more beautiful. Tower Bridge, its towers shining purple to match our wristbands, stood out against the red western sky, with St Paul's framed behind it. ▸

◂ But the night grew cold along the riverbank. Dressed only for a warm afternoon with three sherbet lemons for sustenance, I was showered with offers of blankets and accepted a share of a Kiwi couple's fish and chips.

Far from being hysterical, this was the nicest bunch of people one could meet – and impossible to categorise. As well as Sohail's baby son, I met everyone from the talkative 15-year-old Maisie to an 80-year-old warrior, Michael, who had served in Ulster and Aden. Asked why they were there, they offered the bromides normally served up to camera crews. No one would have done this had they not admired the Queen, but she was not their preoccupation. It was the challenge, making a small sacrifice in common with others.

The camaraderie was exceptional: informal groups of queue buddies formed, took numbers, started WhatsApp groups. Perhaps the atmosphere was like this on the Aldermaston CND marches when the Queen's reign was young. Or a Chaucerian pilgrimage, but less bawdy. Someone suggested the Wimbledon queue, but it was much less rigid than that. I was able to race back to my room from Waterloo Bridge, add some layers, filter back in without cheating and thus survived the night. Your queue buddies would look after your place for a while.

Word was that the last bit was the worst. Barred from crossing Westminster Bridge, we were then forced into the most hellish of the zigzags, marching up and down about 60 times like soldier ants, through security, until we eventually made the promised land and glimpsed the catafalque after almost exactly 12 hours. Was I moved? Actually, I was so knackered I could hardly move at all. I even had a microsleep standing on the stairs of Westminster Hall.

By now the first campers were claiming their space along the Mall for the funeral. No, I did not. I did pay one last visit to the fountain. It was off-limits but I blagged my way through a barrier for a quick look. The original forest of flowers and Paddingtons had all gone now. There were just nine new bouquets. One of the messages for the Queen read "Good night, sleep tight". Something about that old childhood phrase got to me. And I finally joined the 44 per cent who had welled up. ●

Matthew Engel's "The Reign – Part 1: The Way It Was, 1952-1979" will be published by Atlantic Books on 6 October

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RACHEL CUNLIFFE

Out of the Ordinary

The Queue wasn't just about the Queen. It was a rare chance to be part of history

An act of collective mourning. An embodiment of what it means to be British. A planning oversight. A logistics triumph. A sign that something in our country's psyche has gone very badly wrong.

In years to come, historians will disagree over what to make of the queue for the public to pay their last respects to Queen Elizabeth II. Stretching for ten miles across London, from Westminster Hall to a labyrinthine zigzag through Southwark Park, "the Queue" temporarily became a monument in itself. It began forming at dawn on Wednesday 14 September, after the Queen's body arrived in London, and proceeded to grow, mile by mile, hour by hour. The next day it had its own Wikipedia page; and by midday on Friday, it was so long it had to be briefly closed, with those wishing to join it effectively forced to queue for a place in the Queue. The government warned that wait times could be in excess of 24 hours when the Queue was reopened in the evening. "Overnight temperatures will be cold."

The world has two questions. First, what compelled hundreds of thousands of people to spend hours queuing to see the Queen's coffin? Second, considering preparations for the death of the monarch have been under way for years, couldn't a better system have been devised than a line requiring those hoping to see the coffin to stand in-person, in a procession moving at 0.5 miles an hour? A ticketing scheme, or a lottery?

Last Thursday night, I visited the Queue to find out. At least, that's what I told myself – I was a diligent journalist, heading to the site of action (or inaction) to report on this strange occurrence. But that wasn't entirely true. Earlier in the day I had joked on Twitter that the Queue had become such a phenomenon that even people who had no real interest in seeing the Queen lying in state would join, simply to share in the experience. Something was happening on the south bank of the River Thames – something that maybe wasn't just about the Queen. And I wanted to see it. I wanted to feel what those who had travelled across the country – or flown across the Atlantic, even – were feeling.

What I discovered – what I think most people who joined it knew deep down – is that the logistical insanities of the Queue were, in fact, its point. Outside the National Theatre I asked a man who'd joined near Bermondsey how long he'd been waiting. His face lit up with pride: "Three hours!" Further up, a beaming steward was ushering people towards St Thomas' Hospital: "Four hours to go, but you've committed now!"

Far from being discouraged, people laughed. This is what they were here for. Not merely for the coffin, draped in the Royal Standard and with the crown placed on top, but for the experience of waiting for it and of being part of something. For the sense of belonging this physical act of service gave, with all the discomfort and inconvenience it entailed – a small personal sacrifice in recognition of the sacrifices the Queen made during her 70-year reign.

The Queue became a monument in itself. By 15 September it had its own Wikipedia page

In one way, the Queue was simply a demonstration of traditional bereavement rites amplified to a national scale. We mourn lost loved ones by attending their wake or sitting shivah, falling back on ritualistic formalities as a way to process our immediate grief. It gives us something to do, something to think about while our subconscious adapts to a world without the person we loved. The majority of the population of the UK have known only one monarch. The Queue gave space and time enough to reflect after the initial shock.

But it was more than that. As I walked along the Queue, I heard it described as a secular pilgrimage. What would Chaucer have made of these 21st-century Westminster Tales? Or JG Ballard, or Douglas Adams, or Richard Curtis? The Queue could inspire virtually any genre: a heart-warming comedy about strangers who find love in the line; a futuristic dystopia in which society reinvents itself to maintain this linear tribute indefinitely. I daydreamed about the Queue becoming sentient, taking on a life force of its own. Tibetan mystics have the concept of a "tulpa", an imaginary idea that attains corporeal form through belief. Isn't this what the Queue was – a physical manifestation not just of grief and respect, but of that deep-seated human desire to be part of something greater than oneself?

The irony is that the Queue did not need to be a queue at all. Those joining it were given wristbands noting their place so they could leave for short periods to use the loo or get refreshments. Theoretically, nothing was stopping people from leaving entirely after getting their wristband and returning hours later to reclaim their place near the front. Yet the overwhelming majority chose not to. They chose to queue, and, in queuing, to participate in an experience that was about far more than what was at the end. All that would have been lost with a more formal ticketing system.

Does this perverse determination say something bleak about the state of our nation? Maybe two years of lockdowns and Zoom funerals have cemented in our minds the importance of being there, in person, wherever "there" is. Maybe our politics is so broken that any unifying force, however manufactured, seems appealing. But perhaps it's more basic than that. Perhaps it's simply about marking your place at an event that will be remembered long into the future. We spend our lives standing in line for far more trivial things. But a chance to be part of history? Surely that's worth queuing for. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

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We're adding solar roofs to twenty sites
Our Tilbury site has one of the largest solar roof top installations in Europe.

The making and meaning of Giorgia Meloni

The post-fascist Brothers of Italy are rising fast, led by a charismatic, self-made Roman whom many expect to be Italy's first female prime minister. Her stated mission: to "make Italy great again"

By Jeremy Cliffe

As dusk falls in Turin's Piazza Carlo Alberto, at least 500 supporters of Giorgia Meloni are chanting and waving Italy's green-white-red *tricolore* and flags bearing a flame in the same colours. Since 1945 this flame has been a symbol of the political heirs to Italian fascism and now denotes the post-fascist party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, or FdI). In every one of the narrow streets feeding into the square stand hoards of peak-capped Carabinieri and officers of the civilian Polizia, who gather quickly around one young woman when she unfurls a rainbow LGBT flag. Rows of police motorbikes and vans are parked, ready, in the surrounding streets. I have covered political rallies all over Europe, but none as heavily policed and secured as this one.

Giorgia Meloni marches on to the stage, short and slight, but easily visible across the square thanks to her platform trainers, a bright-green, satin blazer and blonde hair. She starts by joking to the crowd that she no longer bothers with the newspapers. "I talk to you!" she says to cheers. "I go out into the street and talk to you. And the left can say whatever it wants."

The cheers mount as she becomes more severe, her voice harsher, lambasting the "hatred" of left-wing leaders for daring to criticise her in the international media. Then comes the crescendo: "I have never done an interview in the international press in which I spoke ill of Italy because [raising her voice to a yell] I do not speak ill of Italy outside of our national borders!"

That turns out to be the pattern for the rest of the speech. Each section begins with a chatty, confessional moment, delivered in her distinctive Roman accent with sarcastic humour and seemingly common-sense aphorisms: "You can't abolish poverty by decree," "It's not solidarity if you let in people with no right to be here," or (in a section railing against "progressive education" methods), "One doesn't equal one." Then her voice builds, her words speed up, staccato, her small figure stalks the stage, blazer flapping as she gesticulates, before she turns to the crowd and bellows a concluding point. In one such segment she ends on the case for centralised Italian political power under a fully presidential system: "With presidentialism, what is said in the square is freed from what is done in the [parliamentary] building!"

By the end, it is dark in Turin. The imposing edifices on either side of square – the 19th-century facades of the Palazzo Carignano and the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, the bronze equestrian monument to the Risorgimento hero King Carlo Alberto – are dramatically illuminated. The whole scene assumes an operatic character as ▸

ALESSANDRO BREMEC/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

O brothers, where art thou: Fratelli d'Italia leader Giorgia Meloni at a rally in Piazza Roma in Monza, Lombardy, earlier this year

◂ Meloni proclaims: "Viva Torino! Viva Fratelli d'Italia! Viva l'Italia!" There follows a rendition of the national anthem, beginning with the line that gave Meloni's party its name: Fratelli d'Italia.

Founded only in 2012, the Brothers took just under 2 per cent of the vote at Italy's 2013 election and scraped past 4 per cent in 2018. Meloni started out as an awkward outsider but her rise has been remarkable. In an Italian political scene dominated by posturing macho men from the country's northern economic heartlands (Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini from Lombardy, Matteo Renzi from Tuscany, Beppe Grillo from Liguria), she is a woman who speaks "romanaccio" (a derogatory term for the Roman accent) and who grew up in the working-class Garbatella district of the Italian capital. She long attracted derision: a snooty commentator for the centre-left *La Repubblica* newspaper even called her "trashy".

But she has made a virtue of her roots, embracing them by developing the persona of "Giorgia" – a brassy, sarcastic and confident product of Garbatella who pulled herself up in the world. Her refrain "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian" has become so recognisable in Italian politics that it has inspired an array of raps and other musical parodies. This reinvention has paid off.

Italy votes for a new legislature on 25 September, and in the final polls before the pre-election polling purdah, conducted on 9 September, FdI were in first place on just under 25 per cent. Meloni's steely gaze beams out from billboards, screens, posters and leaflets across Italy under the slogan "*Pronti a risollevare l'Italia*" or, put only slightly idiomatically: "Ready to make Italy great again." "Giorgia" may well become Italy's first female prime minister. Europe is watching nervously.

Garbatella was founded in the 1920s and populated primarily by Romans who had been cleared out of old central areas to make space for bombastic new monuments and avenues. In the 1950s and 1960s it epitomised the true Rome: working-class, brash and maternal, the Rome often depicted in the films of Cinecittà directors such as Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Luchino Visconti. This was the Italy of the postwar economic boom, politically dominated by the Christian Democrat (DC) party from 1946 to 1994, but also marked by the main opposition force, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which permeated the civic life of Garbatella. These were decades of mass-movement, class-based, ideological politics that reached deep into local neighbourhoods, whether thanks to the Catholic church and business organisations (in the DC's case) or through trade unions and events such as the annual Festa della Unità (in the case of the PCI).

Born in January 1977, Meloni grew up in a family dominated by her mother and grandmother (her father walked out when she was 11). At the age of 15, she recalls in her 2021 autobiography, she decided "by pure instinct" to join the Garbatella branch of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI), a marginal party commanding around 4-5 per cent of the far-right vote for most of the postwar period. "Thus in that summer of 1992 I began the battle that I continue fighting today. Now I do so in the halls of parliament; then it was in the streets of Rome with the first initiatives, the first demonstrations, the first leafleting at the schools."

Meloni became the local organiser for the youth branch of the MSI and then head of the student wing of its rebranded successor organisation, the Alleanza Nazionale (AN). It was in this role that in 1996 she was caught on camera praising Mussolini as "the best politician of the past 50 years" – a comment she today dismisses as youthful folly.

Italy has a deep history of instinctive small-c conservatism, often ascribed to its long centuries of foreign dominance (the French philosopher Guy Debord memorably called the country a "laboratory for international counter-revolution"). Its fascist years, from 1922 to 1945, refuted that tradition; a surge of radicalism and an embrace of the new that ended in disaster. Postwar Italian politics reverted to the old caution, a republic defined by the stability of mass-movement political parties – primarily the DC and the PCI – deeply rooted in civic life and, alongside it, a dense web of patronage, political appointments and state bureaucracy.

In 1992, the year that Meloni went into politics, that world was collapsing. The Berlin Wall had fallen. The EU had just ratified the Maastricht Treaty, confirming Italy on the path to the euro. The political establishment was being brought down by the *Tangentopoli* ("Bribesville") corruption scandal. And the Italian media landscape was being transformed by the arrival of private television. These changes swept away the postwar political order. The DC disbanded. The PCI traded Marx for Jacques Delors, reinventing itself as the pro-European Democrats (now the Partito Democratico, or PD).

That the mass-movement politics largely disappeared but the dense bureaucracy built up over the preceding decades remained defines Italy's peculiar contemporary political landscape. This is marked by traits, as Nathalie Tocci of the Institute of International Affairs think tank put it to me over lunch in Rome, of "extreme political fickleness combined with institutional stability". Traits epitomised by the rise and rise of Giorgia Meloni.

By the time Meloni was praising Mussolini in 1996, the postwar world of Italian politics had gone. The DC's old electoral coalition had fractured in three main directions by the 1994 election. Forza Italia, a new party promising economic liberalisation, had just been formed by Silvio Berlusconi, the media magnate who benefited most from the deregulation of Italian television. The Lega Nord (Northern League) was a regionalist voice for northern grievances about control by Rome and wealth transfers to the poorer south. The AN, where Meloni was cutting her teeth, was a fusion of the neo-fascist MSI with the right of the old DC.

This tripartite arrangement would be the basis of Berlusconi's four coalition governments between 1994 and 2011 – and continues to define the Italian right to this day. In the DC-PCI decades ordinary Italians had experienced political power through local party branches, cadres, offices and events, all operating within the framework of certain ideological principles (however vaguely observed in practice). *Berlusconismo* largely replaced all these with gaudy spectacle, spin doctors, advertising executives, *veline* (showgirls) and vacuous national boosterism; television politics in place of genuinely participatory mass-movement politics.

At a time of rapid technological change, this hollowed-out politics combined with Italy's long-standing institutional inertia and conservatism meant that *Berlusconismo*'s promised economic revitalisation turned instead into enduring stagnation. Yet as the country was sliding backwards, Meloni was on the up. Initially supporting herself by working as a waitress, bartender and nanny, she was elected to Rome's metropolitan council in 1998 and then to the Italian parliament in 2006 at just 29, as an MP for Lazio (the region around and including Rome).

With its historical centralism and ranks of lower-middle-class clerks, public officials, police officers and military types, the Italian capital had long been a stronghold for the post-fascist right, which won the mayoralty in 2008, the same year Meloni was appointed minister for youth. The following year the AN merged with Forza Italia. But then, as the eurozone crisis peaked in 2011, Berlusconi fell from power and his party backed his technocratic successor, Mario Monti. That was too much for many old AN veterans including Meloni, who broke away to form the FdI.

Post-Berlusconian Italy has epitomised Tocci's maxim about the combination of fickleness and stasis. The country has lurched from one thrusting figurehead to the next. First was Matteo Renzi of the centre-left PD, who peaked in 2014. Then came Beppe Grillo and his post-ideological, populist Five Star Movement (M5S), which surged to first place and almost 33 per cent of the vote at the 2018 election. Then came Matteo Salvini, who rebranded the Lega Nord as the Lega, reached out beyond its northern strongholds with a sharpened populist image defined by the European migration crisis, and peaked at the European election in June 2019.

Why, then, was the Lega subsequently eclipsed by another hard-right party, Meloni's FdI? "The best explanation for Meloni's rise is Salvini's fall," the author Claudio Cerasa tells me at the Rome offices of *Il Foglio*, the centrist newspaper he edits. Salvini spent much of the

ALEX BRENCHLEY

Berlusconi replaced mass-movement politics with television politics

summer of 2019 on a hubristic tour of the country's beach clubs, swilling mojitos and dancing with women in bikinis. Then in August that year he abruptly ended his party's short-lived coalition with the M5S, but failed to found a new government of his own.

Salvini's growing reputation for unseriousness became particularly damaging in 2020 during the Covid pandemic. In 2021 he took the Lega into a national unity government formed under the technocratic Mario Draghi to oversee the dispersal of the €200bn allocated to Italy by the EU's pandemic recovery fund. More recently, Salvini has been further damaged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which makes his admiration of Vladimir Putin a political liability.

Where Salvini is burly and brash, Meloni is more sober. Where he often talks off the cuff, she is more cautious. Where the Lega joined Draghi's unity government, the FdI was the one right-wing party to stay out of it. Where he was damaged by his flirtations with Moscow, the FdI has long been relatively Atlanticist (a product of the MSI's fierce anti-communism) and threw its support behind Draghi's weapons exports to Kyiv. Meloni has also been fortunate in her rivals to the left. As Lorenzo Marsili, a progressive philosopher, argues: "Blame the non-right for what is going to happen. They have created a highway for Meloni." He has a point. Other parties – from the M5S to the PD, as well as a new centrist bloc and various assorted greens and radical-left parties – have failed to forge a pact rivalling that of the FdI, Lega and Forza.

A new Italian grand coalition after the election of 25 September is possible but unlikely. Much more likely now is a government of that tripartite right with Meloni either as prime minister herself or the string-puller of a loyalist prime minister of her choosing. That makes it a good time to ask: how "post" is the FdI's "post-fascism"? After all, its predecessor, the MSI, was founded by figures who served under Mussolini and the party certainly remains a natural home for those nostalgic for the ▸

This England

Each printed entry receives a £5 book token. Entries to comp@newstatesman.co.uk or on a postcard to This England. This column – which, though named after a line in Shakespeare's "Richard II", refers to the whole of Britain – has run in the NS since 1934.

Supermarkets shushed
Morrisons has turned down the volume of its checkout beeps as part of the supermarket's response to the Queen's death.
The Yorkshire Post (Michael Meadowcroft)

Guinea pigs shelved
A special week dedicated to the welfare of guinea pigs was postponed, also as a result of the passing of Elizabeth II.

The start of Guinea Pig Awareness Week, which aims to raise the profile of the animals, would have coincided with Her Majesty's funeral. In a somewhat bizarre display of respect, the groups behind the campaign announced it would be moved to the week following the ceremony.
Metro (Ruth Kitching)

Counting sheep
A group of friends had a surprise visitor when staying in an Airbnb near Abergavenny when a sheep ended up on their bed.

The group were staying at the house to attend their friend's wedding when the visitor broke in; the animal

certainly wasn't sheepish, barging into the home and leaving them a little "present" to clear up.

Ed Hitchcock, 23, who was staying at the house, said: "It was there standing on the bed looking at us... If you lived down there you could probably grab it, but for us it was so unexpected we had no idea what to do."
Abergavenny Chronicle (Daragh Brady)

A long way to go
A man has invented the world's longest mobility scooter, measuring 22 feet. Kevin Nicks, 57, is aiming to set a new Guinness World Record with his "invention", which is as long as a fully grown elephant.

The self-employed designer and builder from Oxfordshire is no stranger to odd creations, having already made "the world's fastest shed".
Independent (Steve Morley)

◂ 1920s and 1930s. It recently transpired, for example, that the FdI state premier of the central Le Marche region, Francesco Acquaroli, had attended a dinner commemorating Mussolini's 1922 March on Rome.

But, counters Marsili, "It is incorrect to talk about fascism. Meloni is closer to the US Republicans on things like abortion and migration. It just shows the convergence between the far right and the conservative mainstream." Tocci also points out that "the actual fascist vote in Italy is still the old 4 per cent that the MSI always got – the new FdI voters will come from the M5S and Lega".

And yet it would be too generous to dismiss the link entirely. FdI bears family resemblances to Italian fascism. Tocci perceives them, for example, in the FdI's fetishisation of what she calls a "homogeneous, sporting, youthful, healthy society". She highlights Meloni's argument that "youth deviations" (a catch-all reference to everything from gangs and social withdrawal to drug addiction, anorexia and gambling) can be solved by greater participation in sport. An attraction to conspiracy theories is another such resemblance. The historian David Broder, author of the aptly titled forthcoming book *Mussolini's Grandchildren: Fascism in Contemporary Italy*, has documented examples of Meloni and other FdI figures evoking the "Great Replacement" conspiracy about a secret plan to replace native Europeans with migrants, including her reference to "the project of ethnic substitution of European citizens, desired by Big Capital and international speculators". As Cerasa puts it: "She is not fascist, but she uses words and expressions that appeal to fans of that conspiratorial culture."

A Meloni-led government would probably not last long. It would inherit an economy with debt at 135 per cent of GDP, in rapid demographic decline, scarred by decades of economic stagnation and now a cost-of-living crisis.

Apart from a few old-timers who served under Berlusconi in the late 2000s, her party has no experience of national government. The markets and EU, which together have brought down past Italian governments, are watching closely and she has few natural allies in Europe. And for his part, Salvini will certainly take any opportunity he can to reclaim his place as doyen of the Italian right – especially ahead of the 2024 European election. So there are reasons to believe that she will not have the time or political capital to, say, weaken Italy's civil rights regime (poor by western European standards in any case). And that like Renzi, Grillo and Salvini before her, she will enjoy merely a short burst of popularity before someone or something else eclipses her.

Yet it would also be a mistake to blithely assume this much. Giorgia Meloni recognises the risks posed by the markets and has sought to head off these by committing to fiscal orthodoxy. She even travelled to London in early September to meet bankers and present herself as a stable leader. Her support for Ukraine may well prove a bridge to the European establishment. And her caution could give her greater longevity than some predecessors. "She knows that she has only one shot at her major ambition," says Teresa Coratella of the European Council on Foreign Relations, "to become the leader of a new kind of conservatism in Europe."

This is neither probable nor entirely unrealistic. Italy's peculiar combination of a party-political vacuum and institutional sclerosis has long made it a forerunner of trends in an ageing, increasingly politically fragmented West: from Brexit and Trumpism to this year's record election results for France's Marine Le Pen and the far right Sweden Democrats. "My base case is that this [right-wing government] will last five years," says a gloomy Marsili.

By the standards of Italy's chaotic politics that would be a long spell, one long enough to enact substantial change. So it is worth asking what that change would look like. It is clear from moments such as her speech in Turin that Meloni would ideally like to make the Italian constitution more presidential, tilting power from Italy's chaotic parliament to create a stronger executive. Economically, she wants to fuse market orthodoxy with protectionism. In an ageing and already conservative country, she wants new natalist policies incentivising child-bearing and making abortions and the lives of LGBT people yet more difficult. It is a grim, backwards prospect.

And yet surveying the wider Western right – from the US Republicans to a French right dominated by Le Pen, a Spanish right increasingly close to radical nationalism, and a German right also flirting with more outspoken conservatism – it may well be a sign of things to come. If so, Debord will be proven correct once again in his assessment of Italy as an eternal "laboratory of counter-revolution". As Cerasa puts it to me in his office in Rome: "When we look at Italy today, we are looking at Europe tomorrow." ●

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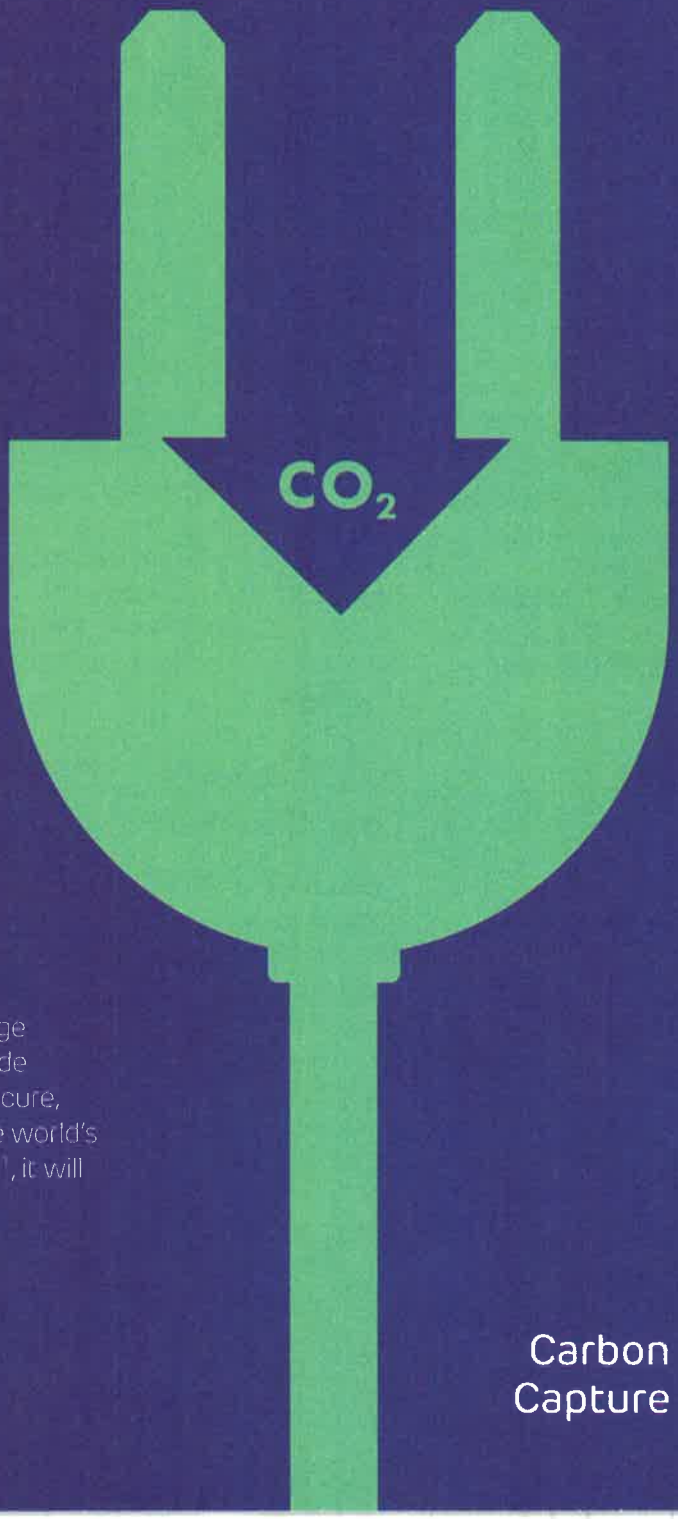

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BRUNO MAÇÃES

These Times

The planet needs an energy revolution – but renewables alone will not be enough

Sometime over the summer, energy markets in Europe broke down. Our voracious appetite for energy had run up against a series of intractable phenomena. Geopolitical chaos, the climate crisis and the limits of existing technology placed a stop order on energy supplies. When economic agents no longer trusted the market to balance demand and supply, prices exploded.

The European Commission eventually intervened, announcing new price caps on renewables and a levy on revenues from fossil fuel companies. Britain opted for price caps for consumers. But across Europe, the underlying problem of energy scarcity remains unaddressed.

Europeans have now realised that the transition to renewable energy is less like flipping a switch, and something more akin to regime change. For decades the military and financial might of the United States has been in the service of securing a deep network of extraction and energy flows spanning the world. Today, a reliable sign of US imperial decline is the growing strain on that network. One after another, large energy producers – Venezuela, Russia, Iran – are becoming international outcasts, excluded from the ruling global order.

For Europe this is catastrophic because the continent remains dependent on global flows of fossil fuels and, since the Suez crisis in 1956, is unable to direct them. As for renewables, their limits have been painfully exposed by the current crisis: a record 12 per cent of electricity in the EU this summer was generated from solar, but this remained below the 16 per cent that came from coal over the same period.

It is no coincidence that the limits of US power are being tested at a time when fossil fuel reserves are being exhausted. Taken in isolation, stocks of oil and natural gas could last for a few more centuries, but that is the wrong way to look at the problem. What we have been consuming is not gas or oil but degrees of warming from the burning of fossil fuels. When you have consumed all the degrees that humanity can bear, the energy supply has been spent.

The share of energy in the total costs of production has traditionally been very small, so economists tend to neglect its foundational role. Its contribution has been overshadowed by the overall share of capital (about 25 per cent of production costs in recent decades) and that of labour (roughly 70 per cent). But the impression of energy abundance is always the product of a previous energy regime. The main reason a permanent flow of energy is often taken for granted is our tendency to adapt our economic expectations to available energy supplies. It is only at moments of crisis that one realises energy is central to the economic process. The economy as a whole could be regarded as an engine using energy to transform inputs into outputs.

For the time being, we are still living with the fundamental inheritance of the energy revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That period's advances include, above all, large-scale electricity generation and the use of innovations such as internal combustion engines and electric motors. As the environmental scientist Vaclav Smil convincingly shows, most of these advances are still with us, not as inconsequential survivors from a bygone age but as the foundations of our industrial civilisation. The only new primary energy source that made a substantial commercial difference in the 20th century was nuclear fission, and its impact remains limited, well short of initial hopes that it would be transformational.

From here two paths seem possible: economic and social stagnation, or an energy revolution. We may be forced to accept that energy revolutions are rare episodes in human history. Perhaps we'll be forced to live with the decaying structures of the previous energy regime. Renewables will mitigate some of the impact of climate change, but geopolitical conflict to control energy sources will intensify and everyone will have to adapt to a world of energy scarcity.

> Geopolitical conflict to control energy will intensify, as we adapt to a world of scarcity

The alternative – perhaps as a result of this painful new reality – is that the sense of impending crisis instigates a new energy revolution. Technological revolutions are not the product of free-market processes. They are the product of historical forces, resulting from the way societies deal with acute crises and the conscious need to overcome them. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Second Industrial Revolution in the US, for example, was a way to build a continental economy and manage social conflict in a large democracy.

We hear about all kinds of miracle solutions to reignite economic growth: lower taxes and higher taxes; investment in education or a radical reform of the education system; economic nationalism and economic globalisation. I can plausibly imagine how these solutions might work, but none would compare to a techno-economic breakthrough that would change everything. I have in mind the discovery of a genuinely inexhaustible source of energy, such as nuclear fusion. Energy would replace labour and capital as the single driver of production, since every kind of machine could be built and operated in a world of genuine energy abundance.

Addressing climate change will force us to replace our existing energy system, but that system is the foundation of modern civilisation. It is utopian to hope it could be fully transformed by renewables in their current form, with energy sources that often have densities and efficiencies lower than those of fossil fuels. You cannot replace something with its negation. You replace it with a successor, a higher synthesis. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

The last days of Roger Federer

By Jonathan Liew

No sport has generated more bad writing than tennis, and no tennis player has generated more bad writing than Roger Federer. The first part of this claim is more easily explained than the second. For tennis is essentially a simple game with infinite depths, a wormhole of tactics, temperament, angles and character that provides the ideal canvas upon which to enact one's florid literary theorems. Tennis is the eternal struggle between beauty and the machine. Tennis is the search for ultimate truth. Tennis is the opposite of death. Yes, 8,000 words for next month sounds fine.

As for Federer: perhaps all we can say with certainty is that people *love* him. And not just sport people, but clever people. Publishers. Worthwhile people. At the moment of his retirement on 15 September, there were probably more books dedicated to Federer than to any other active athlete. Why might this be? Perhaps, as the novelist Benjamin Markovits once put it: "He's one of those stars that people seem to admire because they want to say something about themselves."

None of which should be interpreted as a slight against Federer himself, a decent man and certainly one of the finest tennis players of his generation. He leaves the stage at the age of 41, having won 20 Grand Slam singles titles and with a sport remade in his image. Injuries got the better of him in the end; his great rivals Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic got the better of him some time earlier. But on most of the relevant metrics – trophies won, audiences beguiled, jaws loosened – he stands as one of the undisputed giants of the sport.

Nevertheless, I'm more interested in the other side of Federer, a side over which he had little or no control: the symbol, the analogue, the unwitting muse. Tennis fandom has always had a vaguely creepy dimension to it – this lurid cocktail of fixation, awe and sex. Even so, Federer-love was of a different register entirely: the cooing crowds, the inevitable invocations of artistry or beauty or grace, the sense that Federer was not simply a great athlete performing great feats, but had to embody something more elemental. David Foster Wallace's famous *New York Times* article was entitled "Roger Federer as Religious Experience". Let's face it, nobody's writing that about Djokovic any time soon.

Of all the millions of words expended on Federer over the years, Wallace's piece remains the most acclaimed of the genre: a sprawling, conjectural profile of an athlete at the peak of his powers, and an author attempting to process his own spuming emotions. Unlike most sporting essays by literary writers, it is the technical analysis of Federer's game that is the most compelling: a granular deconstruction of the physics and geometry of tennis, of the way Federer's physical gifts allowed him to recalibrate a sport drifting towards baseline attrition, expressed via a stroke-by-stroke narration of a point between Federer and Nadal in the 2006 Wimbledon final.

> Tennis fandom has always been creepy – a lurid cocktail of fixation, awe and sex

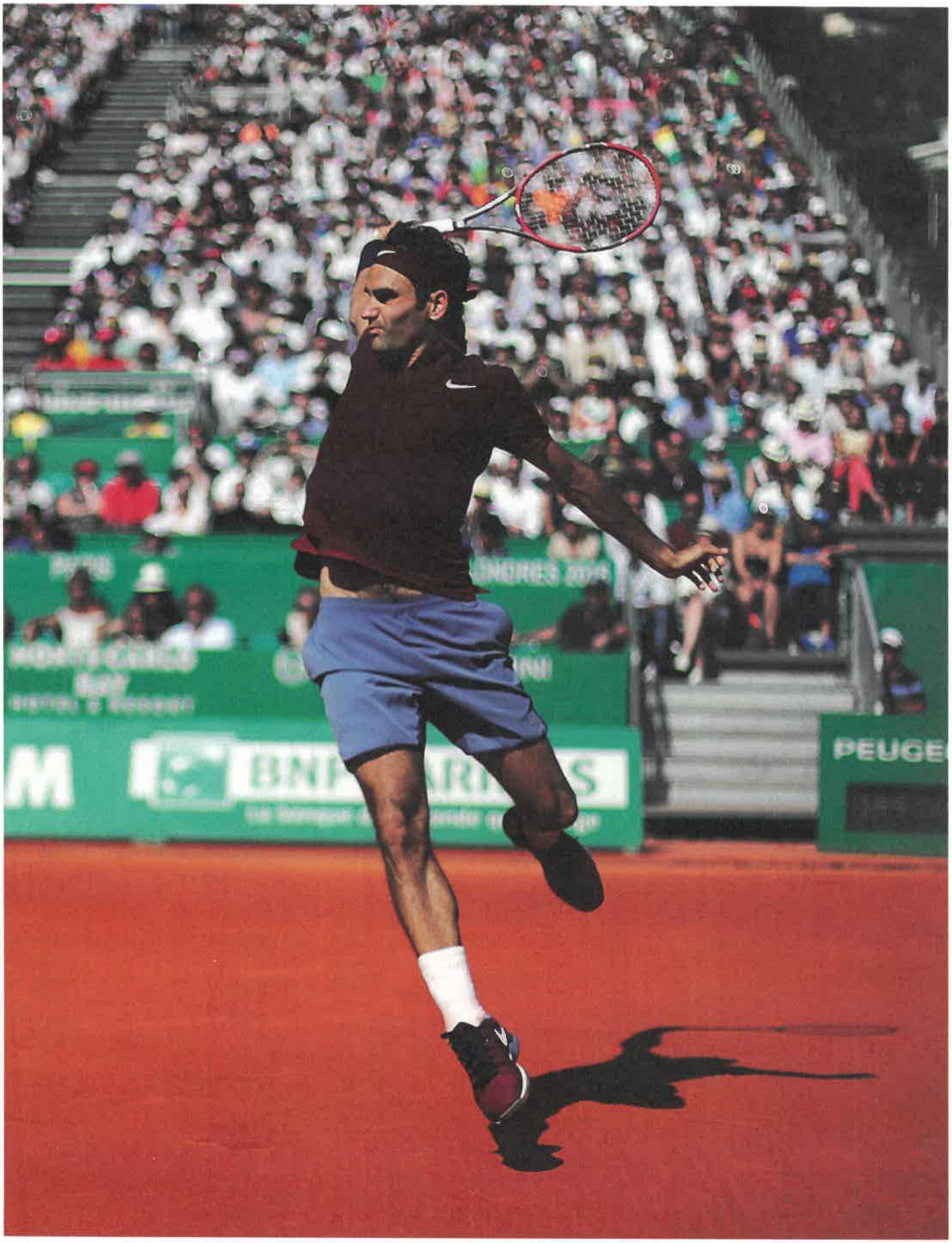
It is the flimsiest parts of Wallace's piece that are most frequently quoted. He writes of the "beauty" of Federer's tennis, a concept poorly defined and never interrogated. And yet over the years the trope of Federer as a player of unsurpassable beauty, of artistry, grace and even virtue, has become so firmly engrained as to pass for established fact. Many of the career eulogies published since the announcement of his retirement have borrowed heavily from this lexicon, casually anointing Federer as the greatest tennis player of all time on the basis of such intangibles.

The first time I saw Federer playing was at Wimbledon in 2001. But it was not until a decade later that I saw him in the flesh, by which time his myth had been largely consecrated. By 2011 the spectacle of Federer on Centre Court had been lucratively reimagined as a bucket-list item, a rite of sporting passage. Perhaps this was why I found the experience underwhelming, akin to attending the world's most lavish church when you are ambivalent about God. Technically accomplished, athletically gifted, dashing and daring: no doubt, Federer was all of these. But beautiful, transcendent? Perhaps it might have helped if he hadn't lost to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in five sets.

I ended up watching Federer win plenty over the years, usually on the pristine green lawns of Wimbledon, and I think I eventually got the gist. Tennis, by dint of its social cachet, attracts a certain kind of clientele. And for this audience Federer came to represent a very specific kind of beauty: a beauty of economy and simplicity, of a world where creativity could still triumph over power. Even the way in which Federer shrunk the court, standing daringly close to the baseline, taking the ball early, silently striving for the impossible angle, felt relevant to his appeal. It also explains why the language of aesthetic perfection was so frequently applied to Federer but never to, say, Serena Williams.

To the literati of New England and middle England, Federer reflected the world as they wished it to be. This is not a devotion that will easily transfer to Carlos Alcaraz or Coco Gauff, the new young stars. In this respect Federer stands alone: a player who aroused the parts of the game that others could not reach. His departure will take a generation of tennis fans with him. On the other hand, it may just spare us a whole lot of terrible writing.

Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the Guardian



JEAN CHRISTOPHE MAGNENET/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sporting rite: Roger Federer hits a return to France's Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at the Monte-Carlo ATP Masters Series in Monaco, 2016

Our common endeavour

By Tim Davies-Pugh

In partnership with power to change | business in community hands | COMMUNITY FUND

We achieve more together than we do alone. Our politics has been dominated by the state and the market, but there is a growing movement that recognises the value and power of a "third pillar": the community. I've spent most of my career being amazed by – and providing advice, funding and support to – people and organisations that are an embodiment of this third pillar, building practical solutions to our biggest challenges, both social and economic.

This agenda is urgent. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, a shift in the geopolitical order, climate change and the cost-of-living crisis signal the need for a new approach to politics. The state and the market are necessary but no longer sufficient to reckon with such challenges. Too often, the power of our communities has been undervalued. But all along they have been there making life better for people and the places they live – taking charge of assets, running vital businesses and services, and bringing stability in the face of insecurity.

Since 2015, the charity Power to Change has invested more than £100m in community businesses across England. These locally rooted and accountable organisations reinvest profits in delivering broad community impact. Examples include the Bromley by Bow Centre, which delivers a range of services that make up its pioneering integrated health model, and Radcliffe Market Hall, a community-managed day-and-night market that has breathed new life into Radcliffe town centre. As political parties gather for their annual conferences, and begin to look towards the next general election, they should begin laying out how they will engage with and harness the incredible potential of this sector.

In short, our politics needs to catch up. By putting power into the hands of local people to radically alter how our society functions, we can tackle our shared challenges together. From our experience, this means focusing on three key areas: ownership, power and funding.

Ownership

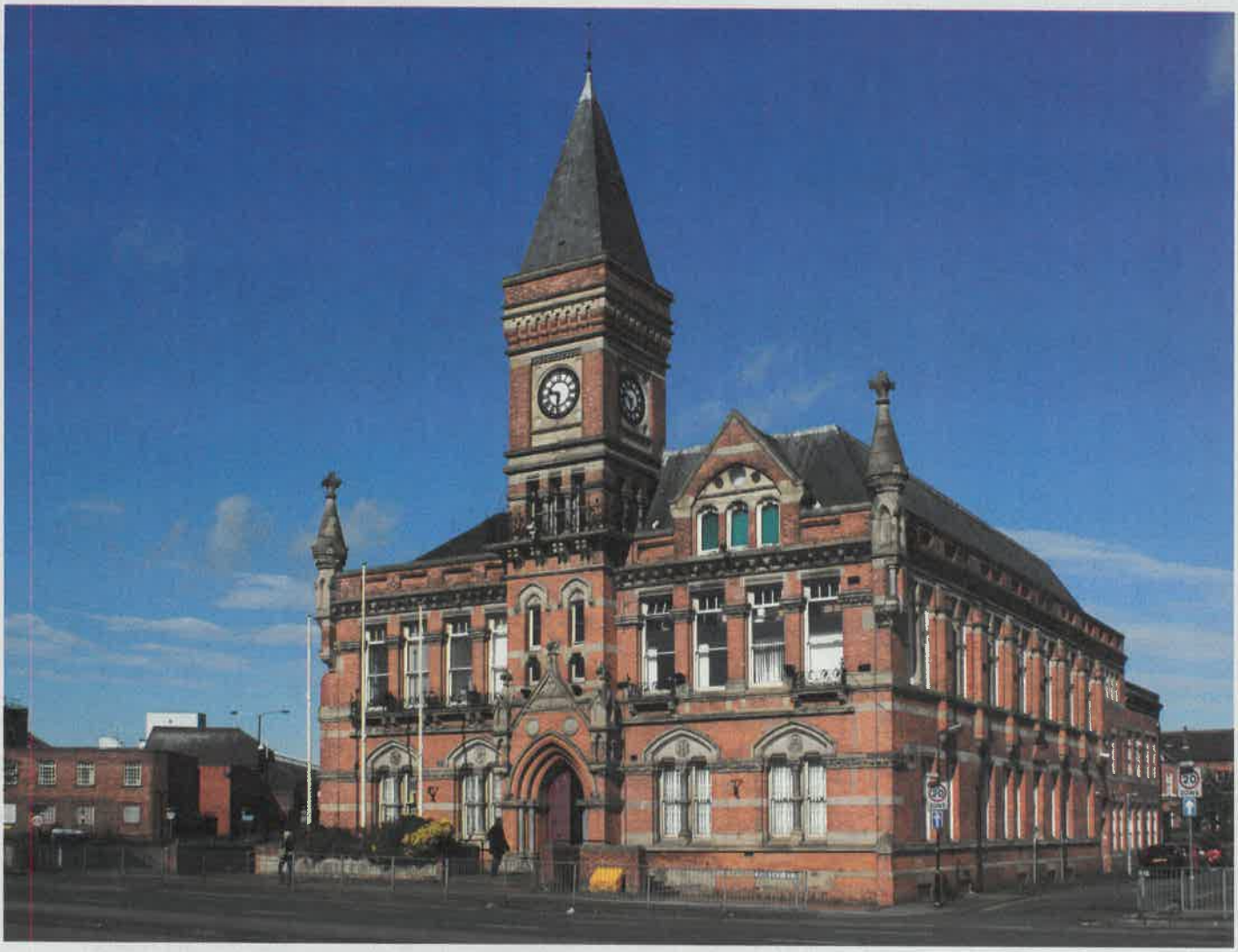
One of the most important interventions from the current government is the introduction of the £150m Community Ownership Fund. Capitalising communities is a surefire way to build sustainability and resilience. It provides places with an asset base from which to build successful businesses run by and for the local community. Research by the Onward think tank uncovered that the most successful past regeneration efforts have had community-led elements at their core.

Power to Change has supported hundreds of groups on their community ownership journey and advised government on the design of this fund. The next government should look to double this investment and give communities more time to access it. Extending and expanding this fund to £300m over four years would put 1,300 assets and spaces into stable community ownership, which would create at least 5,000 jobs and 30,000 volunteering opportunities.

Power

The growing distance between our politicians and the people they serve is one of the global political challenges of the past decade. Recent Opinium polling shows that 71 per cent of us say we have "no" or "not much" control over important decisions that affect our neighbourhoods and local communities. While there are inspiring examples of communities and community businesses pushing back against this disempowerment, it is an uphill struggle. They need the system to work with them not against them.

We believe we need to introduce a landmark piece of legislation, a "Community Power Act", to do just this. The act would enable communities to take back control of the spending decisions, services and spaces in their local area. It would shift the balance of power out of Whitehall and into the hands of communities working together with local and regional government.



Stretford Public Hall is one of many community assets supported by Power to Change

PHOTO SUPPLIED BY STRETFORD PUBLIC HALL

Funding

Finally, the next government needs to get a grip on our high streets. Vacancy rates are at an all-time high and the pandemic has further accelerated worrying trends. The retail-dominated model is outdated, and in many places high-street vacancy is contributing to wider decline. This impacts on people's perceptions of their place as well as their economic opportunity.

Time and time again, high streets come top of people's lists when asked what levelling up means to them. Persistent vacancy rates – where property has been empty for more than three years – are particularly acute in so-called "Red Wall" constituencies, the next election's key battleground. Having a strong offer on high streets will be vital for both parties in the run-up to the next election.

Community ownership on the high street is proving especially important in tackling this decline. These spaces help diversify the high street offer, act as "destination spaces" that draw people into the town centre and are responsive to the needs and demands of residents.

But they are still on the margins. Property ownership data is opaque, and the commercial property market is difficult to navigate. Communities can raise money over time but often lack the capital to move at pace and compete with private investors, many of whom are happy to snap up high-street property and leave it vacant. This continues the spiral of social and economic decline in a place.

We're calling for the establishment of a "High Street Buyout Fund" to act on behalf of communities, snapping up strategically important high-street buildings – such as an old department store – and then working to transfer the building into community ownership over time. Importantly, this is an investable proposition. Government grants of £100m could leverage up to £250m of commercial and social investment. Regional funds at a smaller scale could be kick-started across a combined authority area.

Ensuring policies like these are part of the conversation as we move towards the next general election makes sense politically and economically. They respond to many of the concerns at the forefront of voters' minds and they would deliver long-lasting change for our country and our communities. Importantly, they would herald a shift in the way we do politics and policymaking. Now is the moment to work from the bottom up. ●

Tim Davies-Pugh is chief executive of Power to Change

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THE CRITICS

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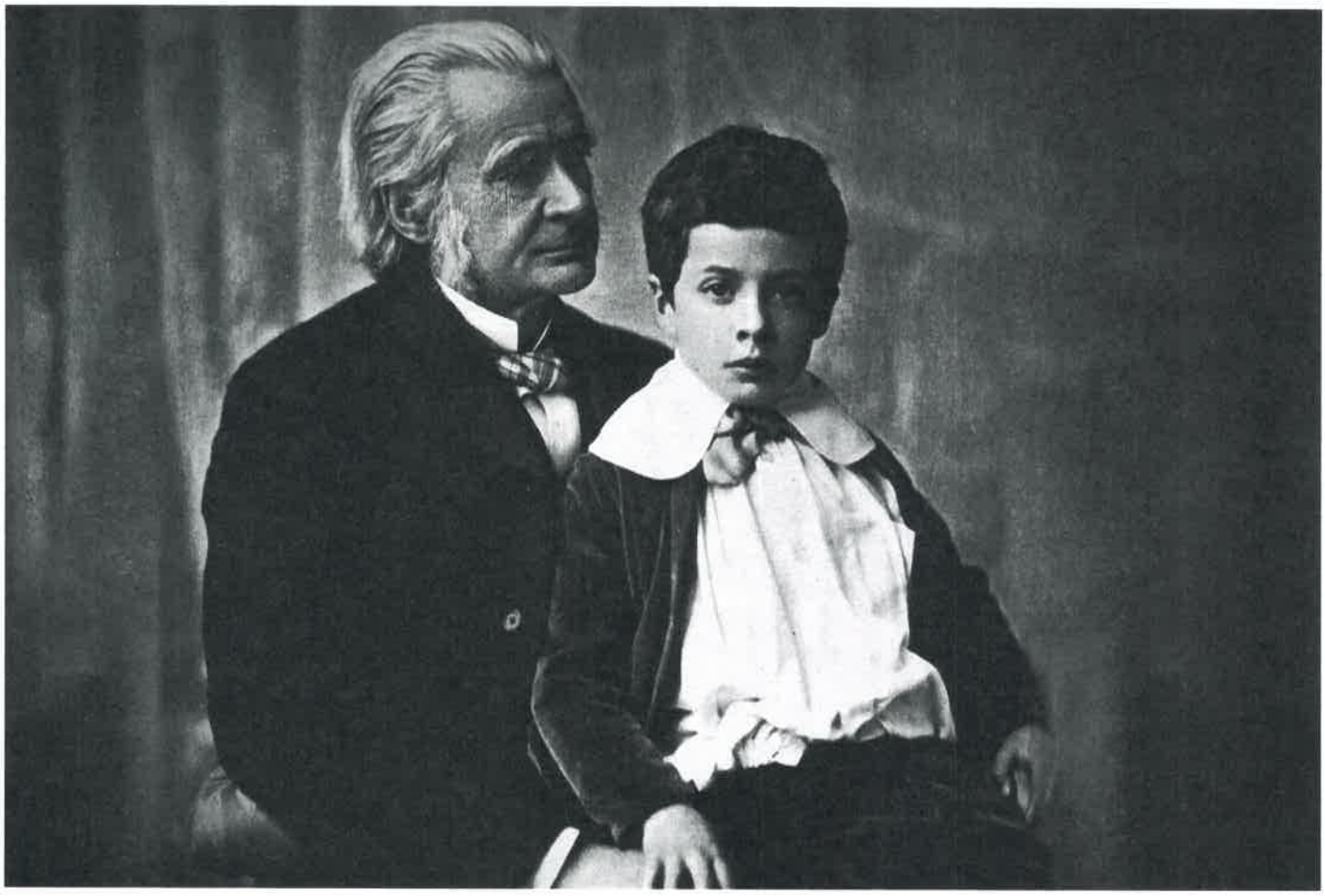
What the Huxleys got wrong

Aldous, Julian and Thomas saw themselves as arbiters of the good life – but they fell prey to prejudice and pseudo-science

By John Gray

"Human beings are not equal in respect of various desirable qualities. Some are strong, others weak; some healthy, others chronic invalids; some long-lived, others short-lived; some bright, others dull; some of high, others of low intelligence; some mathematically gifted, others very much the reverse; some kind and good, others cruel and selfish." The inequality of humankind was the message that Julian Huxley, writing as the director-general of Unesco, chose to propagate two years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights appeared in 1948. "Our new idea-system," he continued in a pamphlet setting out what he believed should be Unesco's guiding philosophy, "must jettison the democratic myth of equality. Human beings are not born equal in gift or potentialities, and human progress stems largely from the very fact of their inequality."

As Alison Bashford notes in her biography of the Huxleys, "It was a family tradition so to argue." All three of the most publicly influential Huxleys – Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95) and his grandsons Aldous (1894-1963) and Julian (1887-1975) – were never in any doubt as to their superiority over the mass of humankind. They had supreme confidence in their intellects, though that did not spare them mental troubles. All were familiar with what the elder Huxley called "the malady of thought" and Aldous (reviving a Chaucerian usage) "accidie" – a melancholy that in Thomas Henry and Julian



GRANGER / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Intellectual dynasty: Thomas Henry Huxley with his grandson, Julian Huxley, photographed in 1895

produced recurrent periods of acute depression.

Two of them spent their later years searching for a religion. Julian found solace in "evolutionary humanism", which Bashford describes as "a kind of transcendental naturalism, but with a teleology, a direction, even a purpose that he himself invented and then insisted upon". Julian rebranded evolutionary humanism as transhumanism – a term he devised and used as the title of an essay he published in 1957. Aldous embraced a California-style version of the Indian mystical philosophy Vedanta. Thomas Henry remained an agnostic, a word he coined and employed in a lecture in 1869. The most tough-minded of the three, he never attempted to conjure a religion or a system of ethics out of the theory of evolution.

The Huxleys may have abandoned the faith into which they were born, but they never lost faith in themselves as arbiters of the good life. Julian sat on a Eugenics Society Committee for Legalising Eugenic Sterilisation. The Committee insisted the procedure would be voluntary, but in 1962, as well as individuals exhibiting "some kinds of sexual deviation", "dwarfism" and various medical conditions, he endorsed its decision to consider those who had "previously been insane" or suffered from "the lesser mental 'disorder'" as potential candidates for the operation. It seems not to have occurred to him that he might not have been born if these criteria had been applied to his grandfather.

The authority the Huxleys claimed for themselves and their values might appear the entitlement of an established intellectual dynasty. But as Bashford shows, none of the three had a secure position in society. The son of a teacher who ended his days in an asylum, Thomas Henry was born poor and had little formal education (although Julian and Aldous attended Eton). They all made a living as jobbing public intellectuals, addressing audiences they needed to interest, please or outrage. While Thomas Henry received a salary from the Royal School of Mines, his wife Henrietta recalled that they would have been "in a sore plight" without his literary earnings. Aldous achieved a measure of financial security only after migrating to Hollywood in 1937, where he earned substantial sums as a screenwriter. Julian drew salaries from occasional academic posts, and in the 1930s from London Zoo, where he, his wife Juliette and their two sons lived in an apartment in the grounds, but for most of his life his income depended on his media work. He helped create a British genre of natural history films, appearing as the narrator on David Attenborough's first television production in 1951.

A popular narrative has it that debates about evolution express a conflict between science and religion, but they also reveal a tension between science and the modern humanist belief that humankind can transcend its animal origins. The idea that we have a destiny higher than that of our evolutionary kin was resurrected by Julian as a vision in which the human species leads a cosmic advance towards ever higher states of consciousness.

By today's standards the humanism of the two biologists is distinctly patchy. Thomas Henry spoke out against slavery and the pseudo-science invoked by its defenders in the US, but he dismissed the belief that "the negro is the equal of the white man" as so "hopelessly absurd as to be unworthy of serious discussion" and wanted slavery to be abolished "for the sake of the white man". Julian was a signatory of the Geneticists' Manifesto, published in *Nature* in September 1939, which condemned Nazi "racial dogma" as bogus. In 1953, however, he denounced the idea that "different cultures are not higher and lower, but merely adjusted in different ways", writing:

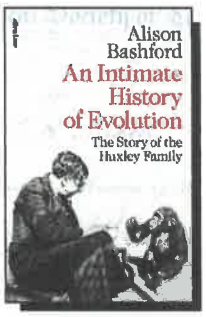
> This is to neglect the lessons of biology... There can be no doubt that the social and cultural organisation of the Australian black-fellows is a survival of a very low and primitive type of culture, even though some features of it, like the intricate details of its totems and its marriage system, are clearly a recent specialisation.

Bashford writes that she tries "to understand these flawed Huxleys less through our own imperfect measures, and more through the measures and responses of their own changing times", and she succeeds. *An Intimate History of Evolution* is a vivid account of a family at the heart of some of the great cultural shifts of the modern era. Bashford avoids the censorious moralising all too common among historians today. Yet I cannot help feeling that on occasion she may be a little too sympathetic to her subjects. Some of the episodes she relates are almost comically awful.

The visits to British colonial territories by Thomas Henry and Julian are particularly memorable. When the elder Huxley arrived on a South Pacific field trip to Joannet Island in July 1849, his ship was met with three canoes containing around 30 of the island's inhabitants. One of the English was hit on the head with a stone axe, and they reacted by opening fire on the islanders. Huxley thought this was insufficient punishment for the islanders' disturbance of a peaceful visitation. More than 100 years later, when Julian made a visit to the South Seas, he was impressed by how well rugby was played in Fiji. In his 1970s memoir, he wrote of meeting "some cheerful abos on Melville and Goulburn Islands".

Thomas Henry's and Julian's repellent and often ridiculous judgements reflected their sense of superiority over the rest of humankind. Neither of them wavered in this conviction, but Julian may have unconsciously doubted the topmost place of humankind in evolution. The most striking of many photographs in the book is one of Guy the Gorilla, a captive in London Zoo during Julian's tenure there. The noble beast's sombre, commanding gaze through the bars of its cage gives the lie to any idea of the innate superiority of humans over other animals. Julian loved Guy "perhaps more than anyone", Bashford tells us.

An Intimate History of Evolution is a masterpiece of biography. All of the extended family are included, including its gifted and much put-upon women, but the chief focus is on Thomas Henry and Julian. The elder Huxley emerges as the most engaging of the three protagonists. Constantly embattled in struggles with illness and poverty, he was stoical in his refusal to turn ▸



An Intimate History of Evolution: The Story of the Huxley Family
Alison Bashford
Allen Lane,
576pp, £30

They all made a living as jobbing intellectuals, addressing audiences they needed to interest, please or outrage

◂ evolution into a pseudo-scientific faith. In a lecture on "Evolution and Ethics" (1893) that remains powerful and illuminating, he poured scorn on the belief that evolution can provide a basis for morality or politics.

Aldous is the least interesting of the three. Like Evelyn Waugh, he began by satirising the mores of his contemporaries in light, witty novels, then developed a concern with spirituality – though the faith to which he surrendered was less well-defined than Waugh's. Like his pacifism, which was common among London's intelligentsia, a watered-down Indian mysticism was popular in Hollywood. He is remembered for a single work of genius, *Brave New World* (1932).

Julian is the heart of Bashford's story. A founding panellist on the BBC's *Brains Trust* programme, he embodies to perfection the mixture of rationalism and credulity characteristic of many 20th-century intellectuals. To his credit, he rejected Soviet biology as unscientific when it was led by the charlatan Trofim Lysenko under Stalin's watchful eye. However, the Soviet Union of his 1931 documentary film *A Month in Russia* is a country of crèches, football fields and bathing huts. It is unlikely that he deliberately avoided mentioning the fear that stalked its people. He probably didn't notice it.

A certain obtuseness can be detected in Julian's personal life. One of his longer and more turbulent love affairs was with a German-born New Yorker, Viola Ilma (1910-89), an admirer of interwar European youth movements. In Hitler's Germany, she wrote, young people had "something to live for". Viola met Baldur von Schirach, the Nazi youth Führer, and José Antonio de Rivera, the son of the former Spanish dictator. "Their visions of power captivated her," a critic observed. According to some reports, she may have been a Nazi spy. Despite this, Julian seems not to have had suspicions regarding Viola's sympathies. The letters he wrote from the Athenaeum Club to his wife, Juliette, who was deeply distressed by the affair, are all about his own feelings. Another lover, the American poet May Sarton, wrote to Juliette that Julian was "a very spoiled baby person", who "did not really listen, or very rarely".

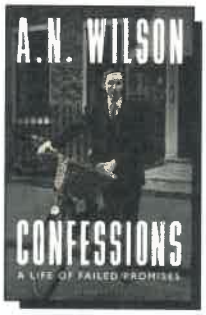
Julian was most credulous in his quest for a new religion. In the 1930s Aldous was an earnest student of palmistry; he may have been slightly perplexed when he was told that his prominent Finger of Saturn revealed "a predilection for rationalism". Julian outdid his brother in his penchant for pseudo-science. Under the inspiration of the French palaeontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, he embraced the idea of an emerging cosmic mind. For Teilhard evolution was a process of "cosmogenesis" extending from an "Alpha" of elementary particles to "Omega", a universal intelligence in which the human "noosphere" would be absorbed.

A century earlier, the young Thomas Henry toyed with the idea of the "eon", a primordial state of matter that featured in the pantheistic secular religion of Monism. The elder Huxley was too clear-thinking to be interested in such tosh for long. Sadly, Julian did not inherit his grandfather's good sense. If zealous rationalists have any congenital traits, a fondness for gibberish seems more prevalent than sceptical doubt. ●

Portrait of a fogey as a young man

AN Wilson's memoir is a full dinner service of clichés – and an exasperating survey of British intellectual life

By Johanna Thomas-Corr



Confessions: A Life of Failed Promises
AN Wilson
Bloomsbury, 320pp, £20

In a certain light, AN Wilson is the consummate man of English letters. Since 1877 – sorry, 1977 – the historian, biographer, novelist, literary editor, diarist and professional snob has written more than 50 books. His works include biographies of Charles Dickens, Elizabeth II, Hitler, Leo Tolstoy and Jesus, Booker-listed novels and a character assassination of Charles Darwin, as well as (by his own estimation) millions of words for newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and *Spectator* being among the most eager clients for his columns, which strike a near impossible balance of spry and fusty, predictable and yet madly uneven.

Fluency, AN (Andrew Norman) writes in the opening pages of his memoir of youth and young fogeydom, simply came naturally to him. His father was the managing director of the pottery company Wedgwood and he himself has become a non-stop, 7,000-word-a-day print factory. He cannot imagine not writing and so the assembly line keeps on running. But to what end, I wondered as I made my way through his rueful confessional, covering the first half of his life. Presumably, we can expect a follow-up on our desks by noon tomorrow.

Wilson has no issue filling pages. "My problem," he admits, "has been trying to match the words to the truth of experience, whether I was composing a fiction, writing a work of history or biography, or keeping up my highly addictive work in the newspapers." His difficulty lies in locating the authenticity of the great writers. Likewise, the character of LP Watson in Wilson's 2004 novel *My Name Is Legion* is seduced away from his true vocation by his "appalling facility... to churn out 900 words at double-quick speed on any theme".

I went into this book with a perverse desire to find something counter-intuitive. Wilson feels rather too easily dismissed as a literary Jacob Rees-Mogg for his episcopal manner and acidulated pronouncements. But alas, from a 21st-century vantage point, it offers very little beyond the stunningly predictable.

We have here the full 24-piece dinner service of upper-middle class clichés: bombastic father, nanny attachment issues, Dickensian schoolmasters,

boarding school abuses, by 'eck caricatures of the working class, three-piece suits, Staffordshire pots, misty-eyed memories of Oxford, religious wobbles, wicker-basket bicycles, yearnings for girls in Laura Ashley frocks, a flirtation with priesthood, bourgeois bed-hopping, dramatic presentations of Walter Scott's life, a spat on a cruise ship, *Spectator* sackings, brushes with royalty, warm wine at literary launches, encounters with Amis *pere et fils*, waspish discussions of literary mediocrities, *Private Eye* lunches, a crush on Nigella Lawson, emotional evasiveness and a tendency to repeat Latin phrases ad nauseam. When I read an anecdote about an Oxford academic setting fire to a newspaper, I almost lobbed the book across the room.

What's most frustrating is that *Confessions* is very nearly fascinating. It initially looks like it's going to be an examination of "the dynamic of marital power": a story of what went wrong in both his first marriage to the Oxford Renaissance scholar Katherine Duncan-Jones, and that of his parents, Norman and Jean, two hypochondriacs embroiled in an "everlasting war".

Norman, a seventh-generation potter and "ceramic genius", is perhaps the book's most distinctive character. He belted out music hall numbers, smoked 50 Senior Service a day and referred to himself as "the Colonel" but was beset with anxieties after witnessing his elder brother die after falling from a haystack. This made him an ardent atheist, later a source of conflict with his wife, Jean (first spotted in the Wedgwood typing pool), who secretly baptised her third child, Andrew, born in 1950, when she thought he might die.

Andrew survived and grew up in Stone, Staffordshire, cared for by a fleshy nanny named Blakie. Aside from his parents' marital warfare ("the air I learned to breathe"), it was an idyllic childhood. The young Andrew was treated like a "Crown Prince" and became a "spoiled brat", until he was sent to Hillstone, a boarding prep school in Great Malvern run by his parents' friends: the paedophile headmaster Rudolf Barbour Simpson and his sadistic wife, Barbara. The former masturbated while he caned the boys; the latter stroked their genitals in the bath. Years later, Wilson heard explicit stories of rape, and boys who developed drug addictions and took their own lives as a result.

It's all here: bombastic father, nanny issues, abuses at boarding school, and yearnings for girls in Laura Ashley frocks

ANTONIO OLMOS / GUARDIAN / EYEVINE

Old-school: AN Wilson photographed at his home in London in 2018

These passages are some of the most careful and compelling in the book, as Wilson describes the complicated feelings evoked by his intimacy with Barbara. "I was not in love with her but I was entranced. While also hating her." The most memorable scene is one in which the author throws a bowl of porridge and vomit in her face. Possibly, this is a fantasy, since Wilson writes movingly of how Dickens helped him survive boarding school. *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* "brought the subversive knowledge that human grotesques such as Barbara and Rudolph, as well as being terrifying, were also ridiculous".

In his late teens, kitted out by his father in tweed and flannel like a "toy 60-year-old", Wilson moved on to Rugby, where he was almost expelled for an article in the school newspaper demanding public schools open up to non-fee paying students. It had been published on the day the Queen visited. Then he went to Oxford to read English literature under John Bayley. Here, he fell under the spell of Duncan-Jones, a scholar who was nine years older than him and took his virginity. By the time Wilson was 24, he was a married father of two children, consumed with regret, convinced his wife had "stolen my youth". But decades after they divorced, when Katherine developed dementia, he would race up to Oxford several times a week to care for her.

It is often the case that in summary a book can sound more interesting than it really is. *Confessions* manages the unique feat of being both spirited and deadly dull, like reading half a century's worth of enthusiastic parish newsletters. There are some poignant reflections, some delicate turns of phrase, as well as passages of engaging mid-century history – but there's far too much cobwebby waffle about Wilson's coevals (a favourite word of his, along with "slither").

It's hard to sustain interest over pages in which he name-drops long-dead dons, embittered minor hacks or suffragan bishops still hung up about the Second Vatican Council. One of his themes is that each human contains many selves. He says he wrote the memoir with the "wistful sense" of "never being completely sure who AN Wilson was, my lack of any feeling of connect between my inward being and the activities in which I have found myself involved for the last half-century". But then there is an ellipsis and he writes: "well, I do not know how that sentence is going to end, so I shall leave it trailing". It is wholly characteristic of his evasiveness and "superficiality" at work.

It's hard to know who will be interested in this memoir beyond a clutch of Oxford coevals, some geriatric theologians and six or seven Fleet Street colleagues. However, the latter set are also the people who will review this book and therein lies the problem. *Confessions* is exasperating less because of what it says about Wilson and more because of what it says about British intellectual culture: its glib frivolity, its fetishisation of fogeyism, its perpetually arrested development, its unwillingness to take anything very seriously at all. It claims so many of our finest minds.

Fighting the West's secret wars

Despite its terrible blunders, the "Five Eyes" spy network remains essential in a dangerous and unstable world

By Jeremy Bowen

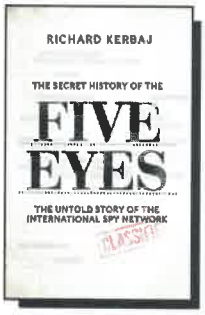
In the last decade of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, a man called Naji Sabri al-Hadithi played an important part in the working lives of journalists who were visiting Baghdad. He was mostly friendly and fairly helpful. As Naji rose through the regime, he opened a few doors for us. I used to play tennis with him at the Rasheed Hotel. Naji had a mean slice and always claimed the ball was in when it was not. Since I wanted my next visa, I always accepted his line calls.

Naji liked nice clothes. The only time I saw him without an Italian suit (outside the tennis court) was during the 1990-91 Gulf War. As Baghdad was being heavily bombed, Naji swapped his two-piece for a dark green Baath Party uniform and black beret. Around the turn of the century, my former tennis partner grew a large Saddam-style moustache and became the regime's last foreign minister. According to Richard Kerbaj's excellent "secret history" of the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance, he was also passing information to the CIA.

Naji's wardrobe became part of his tradecraft. Bill Murray, then the CIA station chief in Paris, told the BBC that he channelled messages and large amounts of cash to Naji through a middleman, who gave his highly placed source a handmade suit. When Naji wore it to a UN meeting, six months before Iraq was invaded in 2003, Murray took it as a sign the channel was active.

When the regime fell Naji was allowed to escape to Qatar. After he was named as a US informant, I rang him in Doha. "It's a dirty lie" he said. "Dirty, very dirty."

Kerbaj is the latest to show that it wasn't. Formerly the *Sunday Times* security correspondent, Kerbaj has written an impressively detailed account of a remarkable alliance. "Five Eyes" – even the name is redolent of John le Carré – is the intelligence collaboration between the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Until 2010 its existence was a secret. Kerbaj explains that it started with British and American intelligence cooperation before and during the Second World War. After 1945 it became clear quickly that the new enemy was going to be the USSR and its satellites in eastern Europe. The intelligence alliance, which already included Canada, was expanded to include Australia and New Zealand, giving the Five Eyes a full span of time zones. The Australians proved themselves when they engineered the defection of a Soviet diplomat with a strong interest in chasing women who were not his wife. The deal included his demand to bring his fishing rods, shotgun and Alsatian dog.



The Secret History of the Five Eyes
Richard Kerbaj
John Blake,
416pp, £25

The Kremlin pushed back. Not long after Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, the Russian leader's men dispatched Walter Krivitsky, a Soviet intelligence officer who had defected to the Americans. Krivitsky was found dead in a hotel in Washington DC in 1941, "with a single bullet in his head, and not one but three suicide notes by his bedside". The assumption was that the NKVD, predecessor of the KGB, had silenced him.

Kerbaj reminds us how far the Soviets penetrated Britain's spy agency, MI6. The story is well known, but still beggars belief. *Five Eyes* lays out the complacency displayed by the British in the face of evidence that the Foreign Office and the Secret Intelligence Service had been breached. After Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, two members of the spy ring recruited by the NKVD at Cambridge University in the 1930s, fled to Moscow in 1951, the British deflected American suspicions that they had been tipped off by Kim Philby. They gave Philby the benefit of the doubt, despite other clues, including the kidnap and presumed execution of a would-be Soviet defector whose case he was investigating. Philby did not feel it necessary to defect until 1963. He was the model for the Soviet mole Bill Haydon in Le Carré's classic spy novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

The real passion in Kerbaj's book comes with his account of the US war on terror, starting with the fevered time between the 9/11 attacks and the huge intelligence failures that marked the invasion of Iraq 18 months later. The Five Eyes had lost part of their *raison d'être* when the USSR collapsed. After 9/11 there was the clarity of having a new enemy, but Kerbaj reminds us how intelligence was shaped to justify a war not authorised by a definitive UN Security Council resolution. Kerbaj writes that Naji, then the Iraqi foreign minister, let the CIA's Bill Murray know that Saddam Hussein had no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, "chemical, biological and nuclear". But when a National Intelligence Estimate was prepared, "it did not cite Murray's report". The intelligence did not fit the case being made by President George W Bush in Washington and Prime Minister Tony Blair in London.

Kerbaj sympathises with the challenges faced by intelligence professionals. He provides a fascinating account of the disquiet among senior British envoys who were flown to Washington the day after 9/11. They included Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb, head of Britain's special forces. Lamb, Kerbaj says, reported to Blair at Chequers that "every official he had met during his US visit had been 'emotionally compromised' by the terrorist attacks" and observed that people "don't make good decisions" in such a state.

He was correct. The decisions around the plan of retaliation against al-Qaeda were not made by sober

military and intelligence assessments. Even worse, they were heavily influenced, and arguably, dictated, by political leaders – namely Tony Blair and George W Bush – who always thought they knew better than the intelligence and military officials advising them.

The benefits of the liquidation of Saddam Hussein's brutal Baathist regime were outweighed by the catastrophic consequences of the invasion for the people of Iraq and many of their neighbours. It was also a disaster for the geostrategic position of the Americans, the British and their Western allies. As well as the huge loss of life and destruction, the US tipped the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of its enemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Saddam Hussein had also been a bitter enemy of Tehran.

The invasion turned Iraq into a theme park for jihadist extremists. More than two decades on, the fires that were lit still burn. One part of this story is the saga of the so-called jihadi brides who were radicalised in Britain and travelled to Syria to offer themselves as wives to the killers of Islamic State (IS). Kerbaj reveals some of the secrets surrounding the journey taken from the UK, via Turkey, by three London schoolgirls: Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana.

In impressive detail, Kerbaj shows that Mohammed al-Rashed, the smuggler who took the girls over the border, was also working for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. (The story has also been reported by the BBC.) Kerbaj has an exclusive account of a meeting between two Canadian intelligence officers and Richard Walton, then the head of SO15, the counterterrorism command at Scotland Yard. The two "uneasy" spooks were there to confess that their man had a part in moving the girls into Syria and the clutches of IS. That mattered, Kerbaj recalls, as Walton and his team had been pilloried in the press for not stopping the girls before they left Bethnal Green.

Kerbaj exposes many of the blunders and compromises that come with the difficult territory of secret intelligence. But in an illuminating book, he concludes the Five Eyes is still vital in an unpredictable world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February deepened that unpredictability. It was the definitive end of the world that emerged after the Cold War, and an abrupt lurch into a new, more dangerous era.

Before the invasion, Western governments led by the US released intelligence about President Putin's intentions that they would normally have kept secret. The plan was to stop Putin claiming Ukrainian provocation, and as a form of deterrence. It didn't stop the invasion, but the accuracy of the information suggested that the Five Eyes are well placed in Russia, using hi-tech eavesdropping, and perhaps agents and informants. Maybe the equivalent of Naji Sabri's suits are being deployed, as men and women use deception and tradecraft as old as the Five Eyes alliance itself to fight this century's secret wars.

Jeremy Bowen is the BBC's international editor

Intelligence released about the invasion of Ukraine suggests the Five Eyes are well placed in Russia

MIRRORPIX VIA GETTY IMAGES

Home front: MI6 agent and Soviet informer Kim Philby (centre left) holds a "clear my name" press conference at his mother's flat, 1955

independent thinking from polity

Blue Labour

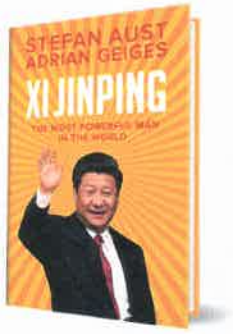
The Politics of the Common Good

Maurice Glasman

Glasman takes the axe to the soulless utilitarianism and 'progressive' intolerance of both Blair and Corbyn. Human beings, he contends, are not calculating machines, but faithful, relational beings who yearn for meaning and belonging. They seek to resist the revolutionary upheaval of markets and states, which try to commodify and dominate their lives and homes. This is the true Labour tradition, which is paradoxically both radical and conservative – and more relevant than ever in a post-COVID world.

HB 978-1-5095-2886-8 | September 2022 | £16.99

Xi Jinping



The Most Powerful Man in the World

Stefan Aust, Adrian Geiges

Translated by Daniel Steuer

Who is Xi Jinping and what does he really want? To rejuvenate China and bring economic prosperity to all its people? To challenge American supremacy and turn China into the world's dominant power? Avoiding both sycophantic flattery and outright condemnation, this new biography by Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges gets inside the head of one of the world's most mysterious leaders.

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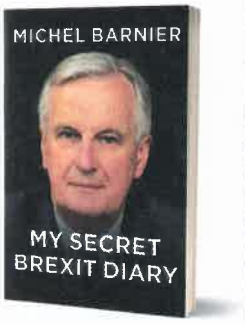

A Glorious Illusion

Michel Barnier

Translated by Robin Mackay

From Brussels to London, from Dublin to Nicosia, Michel Barnier's secret diary lifts the lid on what really happened behind the scenes of one of the most high-stakes negotiations in modern history.

PB 978-1-5095-5494-2 | September 2022 | £17.99

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Reviewed in short

Sick Note: A History of the British Welfare State
by Gareth Millward
Oxford University Press, 256pp, £30

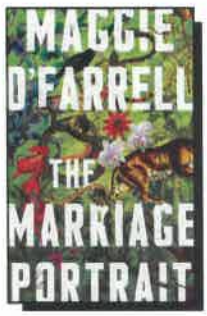
Who is really sick, and who decides? The answer, in postwar Britain, has never been simple. Gareth Millward – a historian of the British welfare state – tries to work it out in this thorough yet entertaining social history of the sick note – a process with which every British worker will be familiar (even if only through texting a photo of a positive lateral flow test to one's boss).

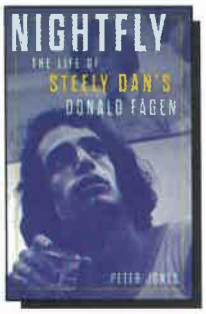
Since the modern welfare state was established in 1948, the phrase "sick note" has become loaded. In the Nineties it was a nickname for the perennially injured Tottenham Hotspur player Darren Anderton, while during the New Labour years the tabloids wrote of a "Sicknote Britain" teeming with malingerers. The Labour government even considered sending "mystery shoppers" into GP surgeries to check whether certificates were being handed out too freely. But this cynicism was nothing new: the government suspected miners of absenteeism in the Fifties. Millward goes on to trace how in 2010 the sick note – via work capability assessments and other tests for disability or sickness benefit claimants – eventually became the "fit note", shifting the focus on to declaring people fit to work.
By Anoosh Chakelian

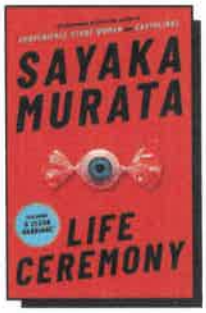
Life Ceremony by Sayaka Murata
Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori
Granta, 272pp, £12.99

Life Ceremony is a strange, inventive and disconcerting collection of dystopian fiction. In this book, her third to be translated into English, the Japanese author Sayaka Murata explores "taboo" topics such as cannibalism and objectophilia (the romantic love of inanimate objects). In doing so she challenges our perceptions of normal behaviour. The central story depicts a future where funerals have been replaced with bizarre rituals that involve eating the dead and then participating in sex parties to repopulate a dwindling planet. Another is set in a society where it is commonplace to make furniture out of human body parts.

Amid the insanity are tales that are more believable, such as one about an asexual couple who resort to medical treatment to have a child, and another about cohabiting friends who raise a family together. At times Murata's morbid creativity can repulse; at others, her refreshing jibes at traditional ideals such as monogamy can draw laughter. Marvel at Murata's brash imagination and bravery, but be warned: *Life Ceremony* is not for the squeamish.
By Sarah Dawood







The Marriage Portrait
by Maggie O'Farrell
Tinder Press, 368pp, £25

Maggie O'Farrell lays out the narrative arc in the very first paragraph of her new novel. The 16-year-old Lucrezia, daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, is sitting at dinner with her new husband, Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, when she has a chilling epiphany: "as if some coloured glass has been put in front of her eyes, or perhaps removed from them", she realises "that he intends to kill her". The story then unfolds this chronicle of a death foretold – Lucrezia's childhood, the brokered dynastic marriage, the heady world of courtly power, and the flashes of love and fear that mark her brief and fateful union.

O'Farrell spins her story from Robert Browning's haunting poem "My Last Duchess" and her register and language are more poetic than in her previous historical fiction, *Hamnet*, a story based around Shakespeare's son. Her world here comprises silks rather than fustian, the exotic beasts of Alfonso's menagerie rather than domestic animals, and a ducal lodge in the woods rather than a house in Stratford-upon-Avon. Lucrezia is a beguiling central figure, both innocent and wise, a doomed girl in a dark fairy tale.
By Michael Prodger

Nightfly: The Life of Steely Dan's Donald Fagen
by Peter Jones
Chicago Review Press, 368pp, £28.99

Living in an era that recalls the pessimism of the 1970s means it's ideal timing for a book on Donald Fagen – a musician who, as one half of the American jazz-rock duo Steely Dan, helped give that decade its cynical, dissolute edge. Anyone hoping for tales of hellraising excess will be disappointed, though. Despite the narcotics that saturate his lyrics, the pianist's rock-era demons were workaholism and perfectionism. Peter Jones reveals these compulsions as both an asset – Steely Dan's "precision was remarkable for the era" – and a personal tragedy. By the 1980s, Fagen was in therapy for his "intolerance of anything he perceived as a flaw".

Jones, a jazz singer himself, has stitched together a colourful story from scant first-hand material. He is at his sharpest appraising the albums and their legendarily lush production, informed by his musician's ear. But the reclusive Fagen wasn't interviewed for the book and, seen chiefly through his brittle public persona, he is hard to like. In the end, the reluctant band leader remains hidden. As a biography, this isn't perfect – but after following Donald Fagen through five decades of exhausting fastidiousness, that's a relief.
By Chris Bourn

Why ports are the gateway to growth Cleaner energy is a levelling up opportunity in the making

The UK is embarking on a technological revolution that will transform the way that energy is generated, distributed and used.

A dramatic shift in the UK's energy base means big changes for the wider economy, and decisions made now will be critical to the UK's economic prospects in the years ahead. As an island nation with a proud maritime heritage, our ports will provide the foundation for this coming change.

Associated British Ports (ABP) is the UK's leading ports group, with 21 ports around Britain handling around a quarter of the nation's seaborne trade. Our ports have provided essential infrastructure for Britain since the first Industrial Revolution and form the backbone of some of the country's largest industrial clusters, in South Wales, the Humber and the Solent. As we embark upon the next industrial revolution, our ports are once again driving change, enabling the decarbonisation of energy generation, industry, transport and logistics.

The development of the offshore wind sector is already a UK success story, and ABP has long been at the forefront of investment and delivery to support this. The offshore wind manufacturing facility at Green Port Hull has created skilled long-term jobs in the region and established a hub for future growth. Across the Humber Estuary in Grimsby, the port has evolved to become the world's largest base for offshore wind operations and maintenance activity. ABP's investment to develop the Lowestoft Eastern Energy Facility in East Anglia will create further capacity to accommodate the sector's continued growth in the Southern North Sea.

Securing a clean, affordable and reliable energy supply for customers will remain a priority for governments in the months and years ahead. Ports are increasingly important locations for onshore wind and solar projects, with 17 of ABP's 21 ports now hosting onsite renewable energy projects helping to reduce emissions in ports and generate clean energy for port users and the grid.

Accelerating the roll-out of renewables is essential, and low-carbon nuclear power is also playing an important role. Ports will be critical to delivering these projects at pace, providing both essential gateways for trade, and hubs for construction and supply chain support. By facilitating this process, ports are helping to bolster energy security and safeguarding existing jobs in industry and manufacturing.

We are also taking important steps towards establishing the industries of the

ASSOCIATED BRITISH PORTS

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Ports will be critical to the decarbonisation of energy generation, industry, transport and logistics

future. Accelerating the development of the hydrogen economy is vital for achieving net zero. As hubs for transport and logistics, often adjacent to major industries and sources of renewable energy, ports are ideally located to serve as generation, storage and distribution sites for green hydrogen.

Major projects already under way in the Humber ports illustrate the range of potential applications, from energy to transport fuel. The Humber is also among the leading areas in developing carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) technology that will be critical for reducing industrial emissions (see Zero Carbon Humber, a consortium of energy and industrial companies and academic institutions seeking to turn the Humber into the UK's first net zero carbon region by 2040).

Our ports will provide the foundation for this coming change

The market for floating offshore wind (FLOW) in the Celtic Sea region is still in the early stages of development but represents a huge opportunity for the economy of South Wales and UK plc. Port Talbot is ideally placed to become a world-leading manufacturing and support hub for the sector, delivering transformational change for the regional economy and securing a major new industry for the UK.

Establishing Port Talbot as a hub for the sector promises to create skilled, long-term employment opportunities in a growing industry recognised for above-average levels of productivity. The generation of clean energy will also enable the decarbonisation of major strategic industries in the South Wales cluster, such as steelmaking.

Our ports are rooted in coastal communities, central to the economic and cultural development of many towns and regions. These historic connections are also key to the development prospects of ports, which should have local needs at their core. In delivering these changes, it is essential to take a strategic approach to delivering environmental net gain and securing long-term habitats. Where major changes are envisaged, we will plan for genuine sustainable development, playing an important role in carbon reduction alongside local biodiversity benefits.

Achieving these changes will require new ways of working. It will require genuine partnerships based on delivering shared objectives for the economy, the environment and our communities. To achieve the scale of change that is needed, close collaboration between the public and private sectors is fundamental.

The South Wales FLOW opportunity shows how ports can serve as catalysts for regeneration and how with the right policies and investment, we can grow port-centric manufacturing linked to clean energy provision.

The energy transition provides a generational opportunity to deliver clean and secure energy, while levelling up the UK economy in the process. ●

Interview

Marcus Mumford lets go of shame

On his first solo album, the Mumford & Sons frontman confronts the sexual abuse he experienced at the age of six

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

The day before I spoke to Marcus Mumford in early September, he had met the Pope. Together with other artists including the British actor David Oyelowo and the American film director Darius Marder, the songwriter had been invited to "sit and talk about art" and "beauty" in the Vatican.

Mumford, who grew up in an evangelical Christian family, isn't "wildly keen" on defining himself as religious now. "I love Jesus, I thought he was dope, so that's sort of the central part of my faith, and all the trappings and the baggage, I'm not so interested in," he told me when we met in a west London recording studio. But Pope Francis made an impression on him. "We had a little face-to-face moment. He said: 'Will you pray for me?' I went: 'Yeah! Like, right now.' So I prayed for him, which was really wicked. I think he's a good man. I mean – the bar's pretty low for popes, right? But it strikes me that he's a dude with integrity."

Mumford wanted to communicate to Pope Francis his thanks for what he sees as "real steps towards reconciliation", his "deliberate attempts to reconcile with parts of the community that the Church hasn't historically done very well with". He had been impressed by Pope Francis's apology to indigenous peoples for the "deplorable" abuses they suffered in Canada's Catholic-run state schools, which operated between 1831 and 1996. The Pope's

ERIC RAY DAVIDSON

Not so alone: Marcus Mumford's first album, *Self-Titled*, features a number of other artists including Phoebe Bridgers and Clairo

acknowledgement of the Church's wrongdoing felt important to Mumford.

"I think the fact that he was able to go there and say, 'We fucked up,' and own it, is a really beautiful model. I don't think we're a very forgiving culture, but forgiveness is much easier to access once you see contrition and a desire for transformation."

The 35-year-old spoke softly, in contrast to the rich and gruff voice in which he addresses stadiums as the lead singer of Mumford & Sons. He slipped easily into earnestness, punctuated occasionally by a high pitched "Ha!" when he caught himself being too sincere. He used a lot of slang – "dope", "wicked", "cool" – yet maintained an evident serious geekiness. "I don't know why I'm talking about my tax return to you!" he laughed at one point. "I think it's because I like paying tax. It pisses me off when people don't."

When I entered Eastcote Studios, a recording studio tucked behind a row of terraces on a quiet street in Ladbroke Grove, Mumford was blaring music by Sylvan Esso on a powerful set of speakers. After raving about the US electro-pop duo he turned it down, took a seat behind the mixing desk, and swivelled around. It was in this studio that Mumford & Sons, the folk-rock group formed in 2007, recorded their first two albums, *Sigh No More* (2009) and *Babel* (2012). Before that, Mumford had been here to record Laura Marling's debut album *Alas, I Cannot Swim* (2008), on which he played drums.

He encouraged me to take a look at the low ceiling of a small alcove in the room, where there was a mass of biro graffiti scrawled by other temporary inhabitants of the studio. The names include the now retired Noah and the Whale, who also grew out of this London "folk" scene, and a couple that have stood the test of time a little better: Adele, the Arctic Monkeys.

Mumford & Sons enjoyed huge mainstream success. Their debut record sold more than one million copies in the UK and three million in the United States; their second won the Grammy for best album. Their anthemic songs – the most raucous of which Mumford described as "big, bumpy, thumpy ones" – led them to headline Glastonbury in 2013.

Yet the privately educated quartet projected a twee Britishness that was easily mocked. They took shallow aesthetic elements of folk – the banjo, scuffed leather boots, a supposed "authenticity" – and filled stadiums with it. "You'd be hard pressed to find a music journalist willing to own up to being a fan," a 2012 *NME* blog post reads. "One told me he'd rather defend Hiroshima."

The look "wasn't as intentional as I think it now looks", said Mumford, who was born in California to British parents and grew up in Wimbledon. "We were never a band that set out to be cool, and people want bands to be cool. I mean, I started wearing waistcoats because I was insecure about my weight! I was sitting down, playing drums, and in profile, I got nervous about my belly. I wanted to wear a T-shirt because I sweat like a motherfucker, and I'm playing, playing, playing, so I started wearing waistcoats. I used to wear them over my John Deere T-shirt."

"I don't think I regret anything necessarily, but certainly I would do things differently now," Mumford said – and he does, at least sartorially. For our interview he wore a crisp white T-shirt underneath a camel-coloured shirt, with dark culottes and some gold jewellery. Slip-on black leather mules dangled off his toes as he sat with one knee crossed over the other, fiddling with a takeaway coffee cup.

Mumford & Sons are still together – if as a smaller unit, of which more later – but Marcus slipped into talking about the group in the past tense, given all that he has been through since the release of their fourth record, *Delta*, in 2018. The most recent details of his life didn't feel right for the euphoric ballads that characterise the band's records. Produced by Blake Mills, who has worked with Marling, Fiona Apple and John Legend, his first solo album, *Self-Titled*, features Phoebe Bridgers and Clairo – two young and distinctly cool American artists. It is his first departure from the band, yet "the most collaborative piece of work I've ever done", he said.

Despite his fame, Mumford believes he has been "hiding", "letting things be secret and shameful", for much of his life. In 2019 the people closest to him – including his parents, Eleanor and John Mumford, who work in the Vineyard church movement, and his wife of ten years, the actor Carey Mulligan – intervened to address what had become some dangerous habits: particularly his struggles with alcohol and an unhealthy relationship with food.

Mumford went to see a therapist, and on his first visit found himself talking about the sexual abuse he experienced as a six-year-old. "I hadn't told anyone or acknowledged that part of my story until then," he said. As soon as he shared it, "I experienced what many people do: post-traumatic stuff, vomiting and choking and breathing issues, adrenaline and my heartbeat going crazy."

"I can still taste you and I hate it/That wasn't a choice in the mind of a child and you knew it," Mumford sings on "Cannibal", the raw single that opens the record. On the next track, "Grace", he recalls what it was like to speak to his mother about the abuse, which Mumford said was not inflicted by a family member and did not happen at church.

He realised the "hiding" that had come to affect his daily life had become a "learned behaviour". He could trace it back to "this event when I was six, but really then a string of events throughout my childhood. I was oversexualised as a child, from six to 12" – in ways he didn't want to explain – "probably as a result of this thing. Honestly, it was the luck of the draw that I didn't turn into a perpetrator of abuse myself as a child, because when you look at the statistics on this stuff, there's a story behind most people that do pretty heinous things."

This is why he valued the Pope's truth-telling, he told me. "Without looking at truth, I don't think ▸

"I experienced post-traumatic stuff, vomiting and choking and breathing issues, adrenaline and heartbeat going crazy"

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◂ reconciliation's possible. That's true in your own self. Looking at the truth, then the freedom it's led to, for me has been significant and life-changing. Maybe life-saving."

Writing the record was "therapeutic", he said. He has done the "healing work" of being able to move the experience of abuse "from the experience part of my brain to the memory part of my brain", which means he finds it easier to talk about.

Worried about the effects his story may have on others, he took the album's lyrics to a trauma specialist, and together they went through every line. "I'm not a terrorist, right? I didn't want to just unleash on people and leave a train of destruction. I feel once you release something you have a responsibility for it, to some extent. I don't think that means I would be censored, but I was trying to be sensitive." All the lyrics passed the test.

The thoughtfulness Mumford maintained throughout our conversation might be contrasted with the impression given by the guitar and banjo player Winston Marshall – whom Mumford had met in church as a teenager – when he quit the band in June last year. In March 2021 Marshall was criticised for tweeting praise of *Unmasked* by Andy Ngo, a book that argued the left-wing anti-fascist movement Antifa could "destroy democracy". His father is Paul Marshall, the chair of the hedge fund Marshall Wace, a Tory donor and the backer of the website *UnHerd*. Winston Marshall explained his decision to leave the band in a Medium post, in which he wrote that he wanted to be able to speak his mind without causing "trouble" for his bandmates.

Marshall remains "a friend" of Mumford's. "We haven't spoken that much recently," Mumford said. "But, you know, I've known him since we were kids, and I love him like a brother, really." He "disagrees" with "the place he's put himself in now politically. I don't necessarily think you can't work together if you disagree politically, but in a band, I think you need a shared creative trajectory. His priorities changed."

Mumford said he does not listen to *Marshall Matters*, the podcast his former bandmate hosts for the *Spectator*. He prefers the *Guardian*'s *Football Weekly* podcast, Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook's *The Rest is History*, and *SmartLess*, which is hosted by Jason Bateman, Sean Hayes and Will Arnett.

Anyway, Marcus Mumford would prefer to talk about the 350-acre farm he and Carey Mulligan have in the village of Ide, on the outskirts of Exeter in Devon, where they live with their two children, aged seven and five. It is a traditional mixed farm, where they raise a range of crops and livestock. "We do it organic and regenerative," he said. "We try not to bring anything on. We stopped ploughing a while ago, and we stopped spraying permanently as well, and now we just feed the animals with what's growing on the farm. It's in a community, so we learn from each other. It's our happy place." ●

"Self-Titled" by Marcus Mumford is out on Island Records

ALAN MORRIS/ALAMY

Tasting Notes
By Felicity Cloake

Sweet spot: cake fridges near the village of Aith, Shetland

The honesty box endures in Shetland – an old idea brought into the 21st century

A little model house by the side of the road saved my life a couple of weeks ago. After cycling 90 briskly undulating kilometres to the most northerly hotel in Britain, only to discover the kitchen was closed, I hobbled to the local pub (also closed) – and there it was. Lifting the hinged wooden roof revealed a treasure trove of neatly wrapped parcels: gingerbread, lemon drizzle and chocolate crispy cakes, all surprisingly modestly priced given the remote location. I emptied my wallet into the adjacent tin, and, as I replenished my sugar levels, gave thanks for the enduring popularity of the honesty box in Shetland.

In fact, the islands have brought an old idea, once used for everything from bus fares to newspapers, into the 21st century; fans of the BBC detective series *Shetland* will be familiar with the illuminated roadside cake fridges which enable enterprising locals to sell ice cream, cheesecake and trifle alongside the more usual bannocks and brownies. Elsewhere on my two-wheeled travels around the UK, I've seen sheds, American-style postboxes and even old microwaves repurposed as weatherproof larders for eggs, preserves and sacks of muddy spuds. Foreign correspondents report purchases of avocados in Australia, oysters in Alaska and cheese in Switzerland (where, of course, the vendors take credit cards).

I suspect the charm of the honesty box system is as powerful a sales tool as the produce itself – the feeling of happy serendipity as you happen upon an unexpected treat, coupled with the warm glow of being trusted to do the right thing. So when someone does abuse that trust, it's far more likely to make headlines in local newspapers (accompanied, inevitably, by a picture of a disappointed child or furious smallholder brandishing their empty cash tin) than theft from more conventional businesses. To steal is bad enough, but to steal from a honesty box... Well, that really takes the biscuit. ●

The late style of Nick Cave

The Australian singer and songwriter is more creatively alive at 65 than ever before

By George Eaton

Once asked by a fan whether he had "reached the same highs" since getting clean, Nick Cave recounted the lows of drug use: "bashed up in police stations, dehumanised in rehabs, near-death experiences, suicidal thoughts, routine overdoses" – even "liking Charles Bukowski".

In view of this, it is one of the more improbable twists in music history that Cave turns 65 on 22 September. Just as importantly, the Australian songwriter is creatively alive. While many of his contemporaries have become mere nostalgia acts or caricatures (Morrissey, Bono), Cave has recently produced two of the most acclaimed albums of his 43-year recording career: *Ghosteen* (2019) with his band the Bad Seeds and *Carnage* (2021). Both are richly arranged studio creations that owe more to classical and electronic influences than to guitar rock. But Cave remains a talismanic live performer. In August, I saw him headline London's All Points East festival where he agelessly dived into the crowd, whipping his fans into a rapture, then moved them to tears at his piano.

Cave has long defied the traditional boundaries of a musical career. As well as 24 studio albums under various guises, he has written novels, screenplays and an introduction to the Gospel of Mark. He has scored numerous films, starred in a movie with Brad Pitt (*Johnny Suede* in 1991) and even dabbles in ceramics.

What accounts for this late-career zenith? This ceaseless striving for immortality? Answers emerge in *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, a remarkably candid new book based on more than 40 hours of conversation between Cave and the journalist Seán O'Hagan from 2020-21.

The exchanges are the culmination of a prolonged and moving period of reflection. On 14 July 2015, Cave's life changed irrevocably when his 15-year-old son Arthur died after falling from a cliff near the family's home in Brighton. (His eldest son, Jethro, died unexpectedly aged 31 in May of this year.) In the days after Arthur's death, Cave told Warren Ellis, his chief collaborator, "The music and the work are the only things that have saved me in the past... I need to work."

> "The music and the work are the only things that have saved me in the past... I need to work"

The result was *Skeleton Tree* (2016), an eerily beautiful album whose prophetic character haunted Cave ("You fell from the sky, crash-landed in a field near the River Adur," runs the opening of "Jesus Alone", a song written before Arthur's death). *Ghosteen*, the yet more numinous record that followed, was for Cave a "way of making contact again and saying goodbye".

Post-traumatic growth – a psychological concept developed in the 1990s – is the term that best captures Cave's experience. In *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, he speaks of how individuals can emerge from cataclysmic events as "a different person, a changed, more complete, more realised, more clearly drawn person. I think that's what it is to live, really – to die in a way and to be reborn". Cave did not achieve this in isolation. Rather, he relied on three key individuals.

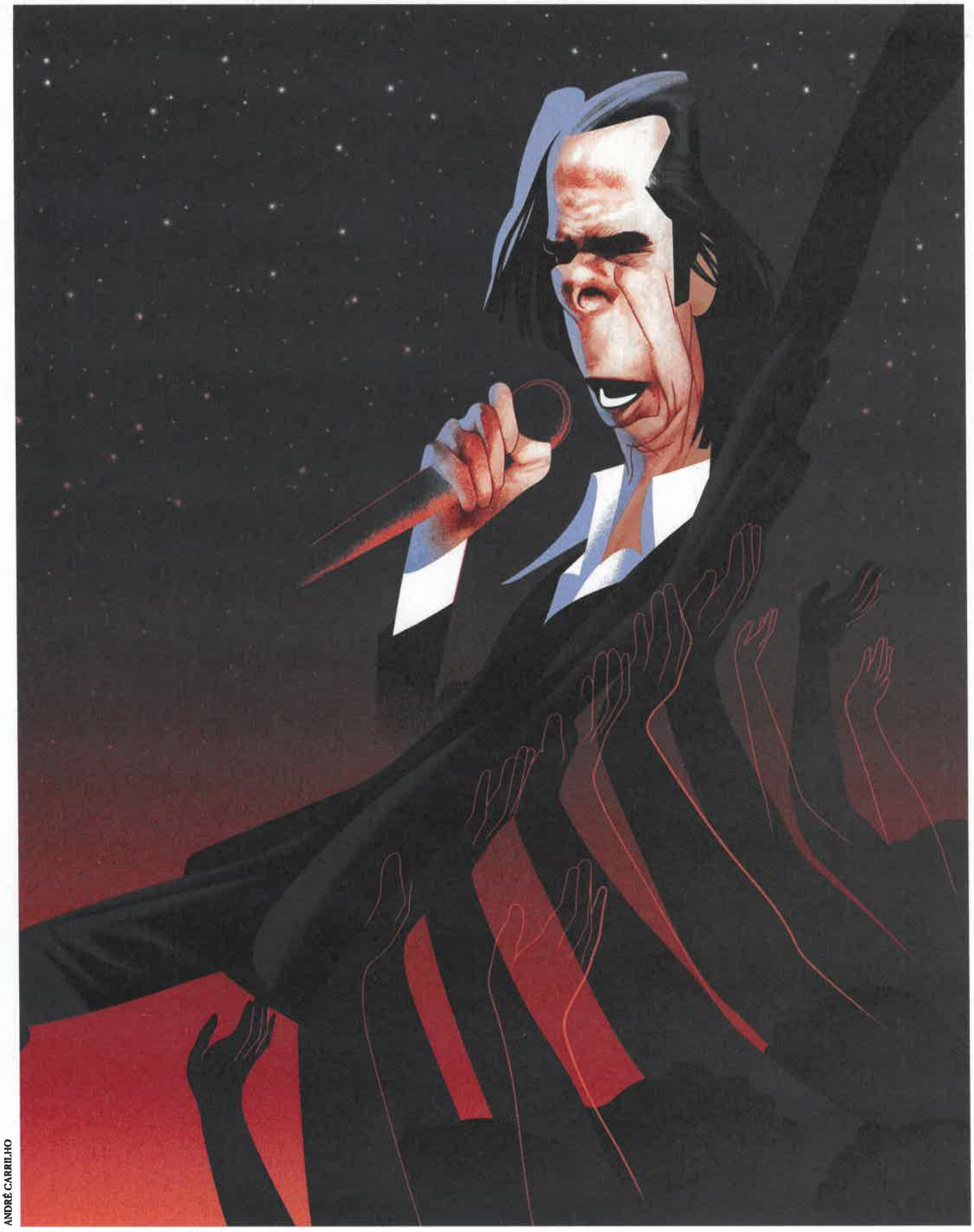
The first, perhaps unexpectedly, is God. Cave has long drawn on the Bible for literary purposes but his engagement with religion has lately acquired a more personal dimension. "As I've gotten older, I have also come to see that maybe the search *is* the religious experience," he reflects. "The desire to believe and the longing for meaning, the moving towards the ineffable... Perhaps God is the search itself." One of Cave's greatest skills is to bring a secular eye to the religious and a religious eye to the secular, the sacred and the profane intertwined.

The second individual on whom Cave depends is Ellis, an extravagantly gifted multi-instrumentalist and composer perhaps only rivalled by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood in popular music. It was on the Bad Seeds album *Push the Sky Away* (2013), written with Ellis, that Cave achieved a musical rebirth. "Jubilee Street", with its majestic strings, has become the most transcendent song in the band's live repertoire.

Finally, there is Cave's wife of 23 years, Susie. After his break-up with the singer-songwriter PJ Harvey – charted on the Bad Seeds record *The Boatman's Call* (1997) – Susie, a fashion designer known for her label The Vampire's Wife, gifted Cave an emotional reawakening. Two years after they met, he left rehab for the final time. They wed on the day of the solar eclipse in 1999 at a medieval chapel in Surrey.

Behind these individuals stands Cave's committed fan base. Perhaps no major artist has a more direct relationship with their followers. Cave rarely gives interviews and has no social media. But on his website *The Red Hand Files*, he responds to questions eccentric ("Have you ever met Nicolas Cage?") and existential ("How do I stop fearing the end of the world?").

"Music is a spiritual currency unlike any other in its ability to transport people out of their suffering," he explains. "I don't take my job lightly." Most musicians, at this stage of their career, are trading on past glories; Cave is forging new ones.



ANDRÉ CARRILHO

A nation of resilient homes

Our fight against climate change must include plans for adaptation – with housing stock at the forefront

The global challenge to reach net zero and tackle climate change is one of existential importance for the UK. This summer we have seen some of the most extreme weather events in the UK for 40 years. Witnessing the transition from barren droughts to flash floods in a matter of hours serves as a reminder of the reality of climate change.

But while reaching net zero is vital, we must recognise that the UK is underprepared for the worst effects of climate change. We need a cross-party consensus on the requirement to help the country adapt to the impacts of a warmer and wetter climate today.

Flooding is often associated with storms and heavy rainfall in the winter months, leading to burst riverbanks. However, there has been an increase in summer downpours following lengthy periods of dryness that, together, can cause surface water flooding almost anywhere. In fact, data from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs show that this is actually the most prevalent form of flooding in England, affecting approximately 3.2 million properties, and is now the greatest natural disaster risk in the UK.

We have seen the disastrous effects this can cause with current rainfall patterns, but recent reports have shown that this is likely to increase, with predictions of rainfall totals for extreme storms potentially rising by 25 per cent in the 2050s compared to now.

At last year's conference, Rachel Reeves committed Labour to investing £28bn in projects to tackle climate change. An increasing number of households around the UK will deserve to know how much of that – or indeed any additional funding – will be targeted at climate adaptation.

During our droughts, the focus has been on the UK's water resilience and the need for long-term plans to ensure that the right infrastructure is in place to meet future water demand. This must include flooding. The government is committed to spending £5.2bn over the next six years on the nation's flood defences. The Environment Agency has already improved protection for 314,000 homes through the past six-year programme to upgrade flood and coastal defences.

Unlike a water shortage, which is universal in its outcome, some homes are at much higher risk of flooding than others. However, properties can be protected by installing flood-resilience measures tailored to individual properties and homeowners' needs. This, in partnership with the national infrastructure programmes, is the two-pronged approach required to create an appropriately resilient housing stock.

The recent heatwaves have helped focus

In partnership with

FLOOD RE

More homes are at risk of flooding, but effective measures can be taken to protect them

minds. Recent research from Flood Re – a joint initiative between the insurance industry and government – has shown that almost a quarter (22 per cent) of homeowners surveyed are now actively considering the installation of climate-related adaptations to their current property.

Earlier this year, Flood Re launched a pioneering new scheme, Build Back Better, designed to reduce the cost and impact of future floods by encouraging the installation of property flood resilience (PFR) adaptations. Build Back Better allows Flood Re to pay for additional improvements to homes, above the cost of initial flood damage to a property, with the aim of making it resilient to future floods.

We have seen the transformation that simple, low-cost PFR improvements, such as airbrick covers, raised electrical sockets and sealing brickwork, can have on a home and its owner. Where properties once would have been significantly damaged by a flood, leading to owners being displaced for months, PFR has reduced this to small puddles, allowing owners to return home within a matter of hours. Reducing the severity of the damage also leads to a reduction in the cost and frequency of flood insurance claims. This means reduced costs for insurers and lower premiums for all households.

Fitting homes with measures retrospectively is just the first step in creating resilient housing stock. With the urgent need for new homes, more and more are being built, all too often in areas at risk of flooding. The government recently announced welcome new guidance for local authorities to ensure that consideration is given to flood risk when approving new developments. This provides reassurance that more homes will be built in lower-risk areas with sustainable drainage and moves us a step closer to protecting the next generation of communities.

The recent Flood Re survey, of 2,000 UK adults, revealed that three in four people who are looking to move house say climate-related adaptations have become more important to them when considering a new property. However, there must be reassurances for homeowners that homes are properly and effectively adapted to climate change. To achieve this, homes of the future should be issued with climate performance certificates, similar to energy performance ratings, to give homeowners full transparency on the resilience of their property, both in terms of performance and quality of the measures installed.

We at Flood Re take our mission to ensure the UK's flood resilience extremely seriously. Set up in 2016 as a joint initiative between industry and government, Flood Re's purpose is to create a more resilient market within 25 years of our creation and leave behind a long-lasting legacy that will positively impact future generations beyond our 2039 exit date. It is important that our legacy leaves not only a resilient market but also a nation of resilient homes.

However, success will be a collective effort, requiring positive action from the public, insurers, developers and government. We are motivated by our rapidly approaching 2039 deadline. That is why we are so committed to ensuring that the UK, despite the increase in extreme weather events, is always able to manage its present and future flood risk.

Flood Re is a joint flood insurance initiative between insurers and government

FLOOD RE

How MK Čiurlionis painted sound

The Lithuanian is better known as a composer – but he also created dreamlike, eye-popping works of art

By Michael Prodger

MK Čiurlionis: Between Worlds
Dulwich Picture Gallery, London SE21
Until 12 March 2023

Two students of early 20th-century music, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875 – 1911) is known as a composer of significance, responsible for some 400 pieces, mostly for the piano. However, for students of painting, outside his native Lithuania he is barely known at all. The main reason for this is because the great majority of his 300 pictures are in a museum in his name in Kaunas. Of those that aren't there, 15 are in Russia and many of the others have been lost, including a painting bought by Igor Stravinsky. Needless to say, works by Čiurlionis almost never come to the market.

In Lithuania he has national status and his paintings, with their folkloric and personal mystical themes, are familiar to children and adults alike. There he is not just a prominent cultural figure but also a hero of the Lithuanian struggle for independence from Russia. All those works in Kaunas were his bequest, intended for a "House of the Nation" – a museum, concert hall and library combined – for which he raised funds. Čiurlionis's wider reputation was, therefore, a victim of his patriotism.

What we have been missing is now revealed by the generous and eye-popping selection of his work being shown at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in "MK Čiurlionis: Between Worlds". The painter who emerges is fully worthy of attention, but an odd one by any measure.

Because Čiurlionis arrives without a traditional provenance, it is hard to look at his pictures without namechecking other artists – either influences or those with whom he shares a sensibility or stylistic similarities. There is something of William Blake about him, in both their personal cosmologies of myth, creation and vision, and in the small scale of their works – Čiurlionis, financially precarious, painted mostly in tempera on paper and cardboard and only rarely in oils; something too of the portentous Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin, an avowed influence; there's some Odilon Redon in there; and a bit of the Viennese secessionists, of Edvard Munch and even the architecture of Antoni Gaudí.

Meanwhile, some paintings are prefigurings of abstraction, futurism and surrealism, while his themes meld a swathe of the intellectual interests of the time – theosophy, Egyptology, Hinduism and eastern mysticism, and the relationship between nature and the city. To make sense of this bewildering mixture, his pictures have often been presented as manifestations of synaesthesia – "seeing" music as colour.

Čiurlionis himself was as complex as his paintings. He could play the piano properly at five years old and the organ at six, but by his teens he was experiencing bouts of mental illness – possibly bipolar disorder, certainly depression. Improbably, the cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz was born in the village in which Čiurlionis and his family lived from 1878, and he recalled seeing Čiurlionis: "passing like a shadow always in deep thoughts. And I was dreaming to be like him. I knew that he was a painter, that he was a musician," but he didn't dare approach him because he was "always so withdrawn".

Čiurlionis left a terrifying account of his mental struggles in a letter to his fiancée, Sofija Kymantaitė: "A strange depressing spirit descended upon me, enormous, with black wings. It was truly awful. I did not complain, but regretted that I was no longer a child who could cry his heart out. Something terrifying weighed down on me." Nevertheless his pictures, unlike Blake's, are largely optimistic and joyous. Birds are also a regular motif but as spirit animals, carriers of souls and intermediaries between the celestial and temporal worlds, not as harbingers of despair.

At the centre of his creation myth, Čiurlionis put the figure of Rex, a bearded deity, creator, sage and idol, just as Blake based his imaginary world on Albion and Urizen. Humans only occasionally appear in Čiurlionis's pictures but Rex and a plethora of angels are constant presences, depicted in silhouette; more motifs than tangible beings.

It was perhaps the musician in him that led Čiurlionis to paint in series: the signs of the Zodiac, seven "Sonata" triptychs, sets showing *The Creation of the World*, *Summer* or *The City* (fantastical and shimmering or premonitions of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*). What ties them together is the numinous lighting that he once described in ecstatic terms: "I saw spring around me, like a glowing princess. All the trees lit up their candles and chandeliers, and the great festival of a silent morning began." Blobs of light top many of his tall structures.

All this intense imagining was the fruit of "wandering on the distant horizons of my dream world", and was squeezed into a working period of little more than six years. Those wanderings were cut short by his death from pneumonia at 35, but this fascinating and revelatory exhibition allows us to accompany him for a while.

Clockwise from top:
***Angels (Paradise)*, 1909;**
***Serenity*, 1904; *Sparks III*, 1906;**
***The Creation of the World III*, 1906**

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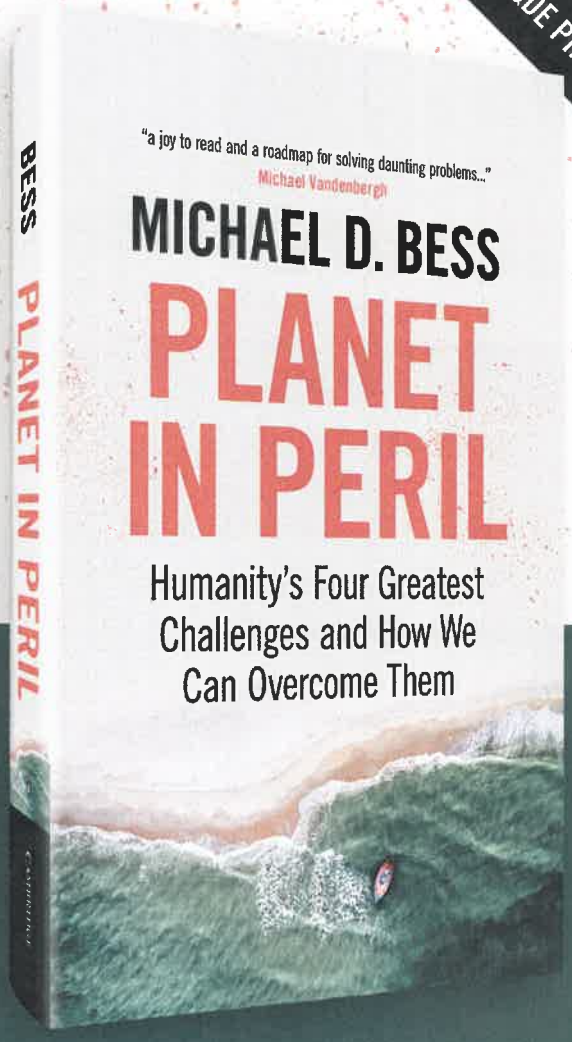
PLANET IN PERIL

Humanity's Four Greatest Challenges and How We Can Overcome Them


"a joy to read and a roadmap for solving daunting problems..."
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PLANET IN PERIL
Humanity's Four Greatest Challenges and How We Can Overcome Them
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Michael Vandenbergh, *Vanderbilt University*

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The secret diary of a medieval teen

Lena Dunham's new feature is a coming-of-age romp set in 1290. But it's less of a departure from *Girls* than you'd think

By David Sexton

She was so young, Lena Dunham, back then. She made her breakthrough feature, 2010's *Tiny Furniture*, at the age of 23. She wrote, directed and starred in this story all about herself and her confusion over what to do with her life as an adult, temping in a restaurant, cheerlessly screwing its sous-chef in a roll of metal on a building site.

Shot in the family home, her mother and sibling playing themselves as well, it cost just $65,000, and won her a blind script deal at HBO. *Girls*, effectively turning *Tiny Furniture* into a series, was commissioned in 2011 and premiered in 2012, rapidly winning critical acclaim, multiple Emmy nominations and two Golden Globe awards. That year Dunham signed a $3.5m book contract: *Not That Kind of Girl* emerged in 2014.

For exposing the awkward, sticky reality of girls' lives – the bad temper and the bad sex, with herself at the centre of it all – the adulation Dunham enjoyed was extreme. Caitlin Moran interviewed her in 2012 just before *Girls* began screening in the UK and proclaimed: "To a generation of girls, she is the thing. The very thing. The absolute thing." *Girls* ran for six series altogether, 62 episodes, concluding in 2017. Dunham, however, was attacked for the show's privileged all-white cast, despite its diverse New York City setting. Her response was to insist that *Girls* was about her own world and that's how it was, the show is "super-specific to my experience".

Dunham's career since has not flowed, not helped ▸

ALAMY

Mead girls: Bella Ramsey plays Birdy, navigating family life and unwelcome suitors in a Lincolnshire manor house

◂ by her tendency to shoot her mouth off. Her follow-up comedy, *Camping*, was critically slated and cancelled after the first series. Her personal life has also been difficult. In 2018 she wrote in *Vogue* about having a hysterectomy at the age of 31, due to endometriosis.

Dunham has two feature films out this year, her first since *Tiny Furniture* 12 years ago. *Sharp Stick*, out in the US but not here yet, has been savagely reviewed. And now here's *Catherine Called Birdy*, a romp that won rave reviews at the Toronto International Film Festival.

It's an adaptation of a 1994 novel for young adults by the American academic Karen Cushman; a medieval coming-of-age story, presented through the diary of 14-year-old Catherine, called Birdy, living in a manor in Lincolnshire in 1290. Birdy's impoverished father, Lord Rollo, wants to marry her off to whichever suitor will pay the most. Proto-feminist Birdy, repulsed by these oafs and the very idea of sex as she understands it, resists brilliantly, making herself wildly unattractive to these gargoyles, singing out of tune, crying, seeming mad.

Dunham herself does not appear this time. Birdy is played with vim by Bella Ramsey (Lyanna Mormont in *Game of Thrones*), her curious moon face serving her well as a misfit in the family home. Andrew Scott (*Fleabag*'s Hot Priest) is her father, a straightforward brute in the book but here fetching and modern – throughout, the film gleefully profits from putting contemporary characters into archaic, backward situations. Billie Piper is her glamorous, sympathetic mother, Lady Aislinn, tormented by constant pregnancies and still-births; Sophie Okonedo is her savvy, financially independent Aunt Ethelfritha, married to her hunky Uncle George (Joe Alwyn), whom Birdy has a girlish crush on.

The secondary casting is impressively diverse, with Dunham acknowledging the "conversations that came up around *Girls*" and piously testifying that "there's been diversity always". Key moments are underlined with pop anthems, the costumes and bedspreads are anachronistically sumptuous, a bit Comme des Garçons, a bit Sixties California. Birdy's best friend, the loyal goat herder Perkin, has been made gay, religion has been relegated, and the ending is also more open-ended and fulfilling for Birdy than in the book.

Not so *Girls* then, this cheerful travesty? Totally *Girls*, actually. Dunham has loved the book since she was ten and first optioned it way back in 2011, always intending to make this adaptation, saying, "It was Birdy's essential paradox that I leaned in to at ten – her home is impossibly cozy yet weighs her down with expectations she doesn't want to fulfil."

The key inspirational line Dunham has written into the script is delivered by Birdy's sympathetic priest brother: "Knowing your own story shall be your salvation." *Catherine Called Birdy* is indeed Dunham's story, as much as anything she has made, a successful reversion. It may be overtly a YA movie – but then what else was *Girls* ever but young adult? ●

"Catherine Called Birdy" is in cinemas now and on Amazon Prime from 7 October

Television

A shoot-out for the Mumsnet crowd

By Rachel Cooke

Crossfire
BBC One, aired 20 September; available on catch-up

Keeley Hawes' new drama is basically *Die Hard* for the Mumsnet generation. There her character is, installed in a Spanish holiday resort with her husband, children and two other couples, hoping for sun, sea and "crispy calamari" (which may or may not be a euphemism), when a pair of vengeful shooters appear by the swimming pool. Everyone panics, of course; the rush is worse than for early-morning sun loungers. But Jo is made of sterner stuff, rejecting flip-flops in favour of a pair of trainers before striding out into the hotel's labyrinthine corridors. Moments later, she is armed and dangerous: quite the vision in her linen shorts (Boden? Next?), now nicely accessorised with an ancient shotgun.

I'm not saying that *Crossfire*, a three-part series created and written by the novelist Louise Doughty, isn't enjoyable; if the white wine is open and you've nothing better to do, it might be a fun thing to watch while simultaneously WhatsApp-ing your pals and attending to your toenails. But boy, it's preposterous – and here, I'm afraid, I must warn you that dastardly

LUKE VARLEY / BBC / DANCING LEDGE PRODUCTIONS

Squid endgame: Keeley Hawes finds trouble on holiday in Spain

spoilers are about to come your way, skidding towards you like flamingo-pink inflatables across chlorinated water on a windy day. On the plus side, Jo is an ex-police officer; reputedly, she knows how to use a gun. On the minus side, she is currently having a pseudo-affair with Chinar (Vikash Bhai), who's not only a member of their holiday party, but her husband's best friend.

They like to dole out the advice on Mumsnet, but surely not even its glorious community has ever had to counsel an adulterous woman as to what to do should she happen to be separated from both her mobile phone and her husband by a crazed gunman. I mean, it's a tricky one. You want to know if your children, from whom you've also become separated, have tried to contact you. But if you give your husband, who's hiding in your bedroom, the passcode so he can read your messages, it's more than likely he'll find out you've been almost-sleeping with his mate. Also, what if his phone isn't on silent? The crazed gunman will hear it! Faced with this dilemma, Jo goes ahead and calls Jason (Lee Ingleby), and five seconds after this, he's leaving a friendly message for Chinar. "I hope they shoot you," he says, words he will – but of course he will! – soon come to regret.

Both Doughty and her producers seem to be too worried about the audience, and whether or not we are really feeling it: the fear, and the guilt. Why else would *Crossfire* come not only with explanatory flashbacks, but with explanatory, er, explanations in the form of a voiceover from Jo, in which she ponders such things as time and chance, and even indulges in some good old-fashioned self-help? ("No more excuses!" she instructs herself, now back in Blighty, advice which isn't in the PTSD recovery handbook, but never mind.) They've forgotten the rule, which is that drama should show, not tell.

Even weirder, though, is the fact that the whole thing peaks too soon. There is bloodshed and sadness and then there is... Leicester (I think), where Jo and the temporarily (we hope) disabled Jason must somehow try to live together. In a way, this is the true horror story: the aftermath. Except, once they're home, everyone happily sucks up everyone else's platitudes, Jo accepts a police commendation for bravery, and all is basically tickety-boo (and quite boring).

Hawes is good, of course. You can see why she would have wanted this part (her production company made *Crossfire*, and she's an executive producer). She's hardly off screen, and how often do women actors get to be the gun-toting heroine? But not even she can make the script any less lumbering or ridiculous.

I could hardly believe it when, mid-carnage, she actually said "It's... complicated" of her secret love affair (she was whispering to a member of the hotel's Spanish staff, the two of them having taken a brief break from their Bruce Willis routine). Meanwhile, everyone around her, including the usually wonderful Josette Simon, who plays another of her holidaying friends, is distinctly underpowered: no charm, not much charisma, and definitely no crispy calamari. ●

Radio

The war for rare metals

By Anna Leszkiewicz

The Scramble for Rare Earths
BBC Radio 4, weekdays from 26 September, 1.45pm

In his 2008 book *McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld*, the journalist Misha Glenny explored a secretive black market in which warlords and mafia bosses from across the globe were conducting dodgy deals with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other central African countries. They were trading weapons to warring factions not in exchange for drugs, but "rare earth elements".

Glenny's new radio series *The Scramble for Rare Earths*, airing throughout the week on BBC Radio 4, explores how this small group of metals has replaced natural gas and oil as the critical raw material that defines a "brutal competition" for natural resources between China, the US and Europe. In his words, these metals "hold the key to our future".

The term "rare earths" refers to 17 chemically similar elements (15 lanthanides, plus scandium and yttrium), and is something of a misnomer. They were named as such when they were first discovered in the late 1700s, but we now know that they proliferate. These metals often have magnetic and electronic properties that lend them a "vast and wondrous array of applications" – cerium is used to colour glass, and is found in pink glassware and rose-coloured spectacles, but is also used as a "signal booster" that enables global internet communications. Yttrium and europium are used in smartphone batteries and display screens, and samarium is used to treat lung cancer. Some have crucial green-energy applications – such as in wind turbines or electric car batteries, making them vital for the move away from fossil fuels.

In the first episode, Glenny explains how China dominated the mining and refining of these materials (as early as 1992, Deng Xiaoping observed "the Middle East has oil, China has the rare earths"). Later episodes in this insightful series explore the potentially harmful environmental impacts of mining rare earth metals, the role of neodymium magnets in the transition to green energy, and the huge amounts of rare earth minerals in Ukraine. ●

Cerium is used in rose-coloured spectacles and also as a "signal booster" for global internet connections

Schools deserve better

It's time for the government to show it values education

By Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney

In partnership with national education union. value education. VALUE EDUCATORS

Education is in crisis. Twelve years of Conservative rule have left schools desperately short of funding, staff overworked and underpaid, and pupils missing out on the education they deserve. We cannot go on like this – we are failing our children.

By 2025, school spending per pupil will actually be 3 per cent below the 2010 level in real terms, reversing the long-term trend for real-terms growth. Despite all the government's rhetoric of prioritising education and of levelling up, the money has not followed. Austerity measures of the early 2010s mean that schools have not had the cash reserves necessary to invest in crucial building upgrades.

If the current government had maintained the school rebuilding programme at the equivalent level of the last Labour government, an extra £26.7bn would have been invested by now. Instead, we hear regularly from head teachers concerned that their classrooms are falling into disrepair.

It has become the norm for schools to run fundraising drives to meet essential costs. How many of you have been asked to set up a direct debit to your child's schools? Or had to put your hands in your pocket so the school can afford to replace out-of-date computers? It shouldn't have to be like this.

Moreover, this system is fundamentally unfair. The biggest cuts over this period have been faced by schools in deprived areas – a situation compounded by the National Funding Formula. The greater the need, the deeper the problems. And it is in these areas that parents are less likely to be able to afford to contribute their own hard-earned money to make up for these shortfalls. All the talk of levelling up rings hollow when we examine the reality.

The Covid-19 pandemic had profound effects on children and young people – effects that will be long-lasting, particularly for disadvantaged students. However, coming out of the pandemic could also have presented an opportunity for a reset. As a nation we could have ensured that our young people were given the tools they needed and provided with the right support to make up for any missed experiences, and re-examined how our assessment system was setting young people up to succeed.

There were even plans in place for how to achieve this. Kevan Collins, the government's former education recovery commissioner, produced a detailed proposal of the investment that was needed for education recovery. Furthermore, several commissions,

Students receiving their GCSE results

ANTHONY DEVLIN / STRINGER / GETTY IMAGES

including the Independent Assessment Commission and Times Education Commission, showed a way forward for creating an approach to assessments that would work for all pupils. Once again, the government ignored all this research, dismissing pragmatic approaches from experts in the field in favour of an ideological commitment to high-stakes exams and denying schools the funding they needed.

Even before the pandemic, the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had stopped closing. The gap at primary school increased for the first time since 2007, with researchers noting that "the rise in poverty over the past two decades and the squeeze on per pupil school funding and other public services since 2010 – are likely to have contributed".

Children need security. Instead, in growing numbers, they experience the stresses of poverty and poor mental health. An estimated 3.9 million children are now living in poverty – eight children in every class of 30 – and this is only going to get worse with the current cost-of-living crisis. Teachers regularly report having to dip into their own pockets to buy food or clothing for their pupils.

The crisis in special educational needs and disabilities (Send) funding is not going away, either. The gap between demand for education health and care plans (EHCPs) and their supply widens annually. Local authority Send budgets are at breaking point, with Send deficits expected to total up to £3bn by 2023. Schools are struggling to fulfil their commitments to children and students with Send under the code of practice.

It has become the norm for schools to fundraise to meet essential costs

We now see a recruitment and retention crisis in education. The number of newly qualified teachers is lower than in every year but one since 2012, despite a large boost to the number of teacher trainees in 2020/21 as a – presumably temporary – result of the pandemic and associated recession. Astonishingly, almost a quarter of teachers leave the profession within three years and almost a third within five years.

Despite all this, the new Prime Minister has spent little of the past couple of months telling us how her government will support schools and the teachers, support staff and other education workers who keep the show on the road. Education has been an afterthought throughout the entire process. No plan has been announced about how the government will support teachers and schools through the cost-of-living crisis.

Later this term we will be balloting our members over the government's measly pay offer, which presents a significant real-terms pay cut. There hasn't been a teachers' strike over pay since 2008, but since that time our pay has fallen dramatically. Pay for experienced teachers has fallen by one fifth in real terms since 2010. Support and supply staff get an even worse deal, with term-time-only pay making them some of the lowest earners in the public sector.

Educators don't want to strike – we want to be in the classroom teaching our pupils. But we just can't stand by and watch the biggest real-terms decline in teachers' pay this century. If we do, the problems with teacher recruitment and retention will just keep getting bigger, damaging our children's education.

It's time this government showed that it values education and values educators. It must immediately address the issues that are vital to children and the teaching profession: workload, child poverty, school funding, recruitment and retention, and pay. This can't go on – we deserve better than this. Parents deserve better. And, crucially, children deserve better, too.

Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney are joint general secretaries of the National Education Union

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Off the Record

Pravina Rudra

From rugby to rock-climbing, I'm doing things I'm bad at – and it's working wonders

Over the past year I have learned that I struggle to be vulnerable. It feels strange to write that, because people generally know me as an over-sharer. But I came to discover various subtle ways in which I would put my guard up, or try to control things to protect myself from pain or embarrassment.

Like many neuroses, this seems to have started in adolescence – even earlier, perhaps, as aged four I had a brain tumour, and then medical interventions in my formative years. A difficulty in being vulnerable, I have since learned, is not uncommon among women of south Asian heritage. Cultural values can teach us to tense up, bristle and clench – to protect ourselves from others' bad intentions, or worse, their judgement.

My attempt to unpick this habit began entirely accidentally. A friend encouraged me to start playing tag rugby this year. Initially the prospect didn't seem appealing. I hadn't played a team game since primary school – and has there ever been a sporting persona more intimidating than the "rugby lad"? My ignorance of the sport was profound: I never knew until I started playing that in rugby you have to pass the ball backwards. It seemed to me a highly inefficient way of getting it across the pitch.

At first I could barely catch the ball. Before tag sessions I'd wake up in the mornings feeling so nauseous I hoped I might throw up, and have an excuse not to go to what felt like a weekly humiliation. But slowly I realised that I wouldn't get anywhere unless I ran and asked for the ball; that even when I dropped it no one really cared, and the world didn't fold in on me.

I gradually found myself enjoying the sport, and scoring tries. Being vulnerable was paying off. So, with a friend, I started bouldering – wall-climbing but, crucially, without a harness (just the kind of security mechanism I favour). That, too, taught me to take risks – a lesson I've applied most recently by ending a relationship that wasn't working. It felt foolhardy – would I ever meet someone else?

In order to ascend the rock wall I must let go of one hold and swing my body upwards, without any certainty I'll have the strength to grab on to another hold. In this way I realised I couldn't move on, or meet someone else, unless I let go of what I'd had.

Then, recently, I went to a festival called Camp Wildfire – a "summer camp for adults". Deep in the forest, we took part in everything from hide-and-seek to Nerf gun battles. I found that if I held on to the sides of the water slide, I'd never pick up speed or adrenaline. If I tried to protect myself from the twinge of rubber pellets by cowering behind a haystack, I'd never feel the rush of hitting my target.

My strangest discovery was that my attempts to exert control not only prevented enjoyment but took me further from the safety I was hoping for in the first place. If I froze up during burlesque dancing, for fear I wasn't looking sexy, I'd stiffen into an unsexy robot anyhow. If I jumped from a height cautiously, failing to throw my arms and legs into the air, I'd injure my back on landing. If I started overthinking and shaking when I climbed a tree, I'd lose my grip. I filled my weekend with behavioural experiments that might otherwise be spread over a lifetime of therapy. Input: less control, led to output: better, happier, safer.

My friends laugh at the wholesome life I now lead: how, with my fellow rugby players I run and wave little fluorescent tags like they did in primary school. But the older I get, the more I relish these opportunities to risk making a fool of myself and to have a go at something I know nothing about.

I used to opt for the same hobbies I'd always pursued, with the goal of mastery. Now I want to do things I'm bad at – the more ridiculous the better.

I tend to find this is a growing trend among millennials – friends have taken up pole dancing, blokey men I know have started netball and life drawing. The founders of the camp I attended set it up because they mourned the fact that only children "play", that adults do not traditionally engage in "activities".

In terms of making myself vulnerable, I still have a way to go (perhaps I'll try a naturist camp next). Continually countering every instinct I've developed over 28 years is painful (physically, too: I have cuts and scrapes all over). On my third ever rugby session a ball hit my face and was left with an orange make-up stain across half of it, much to my embarrassment. But I have learned that we must allow ourselves to be hurt in order to experience joy. And now I prefer to let life run its course; to go with the flow – because constructing barriers never did me much good. ●

Tracey Thorn is on sabbatical

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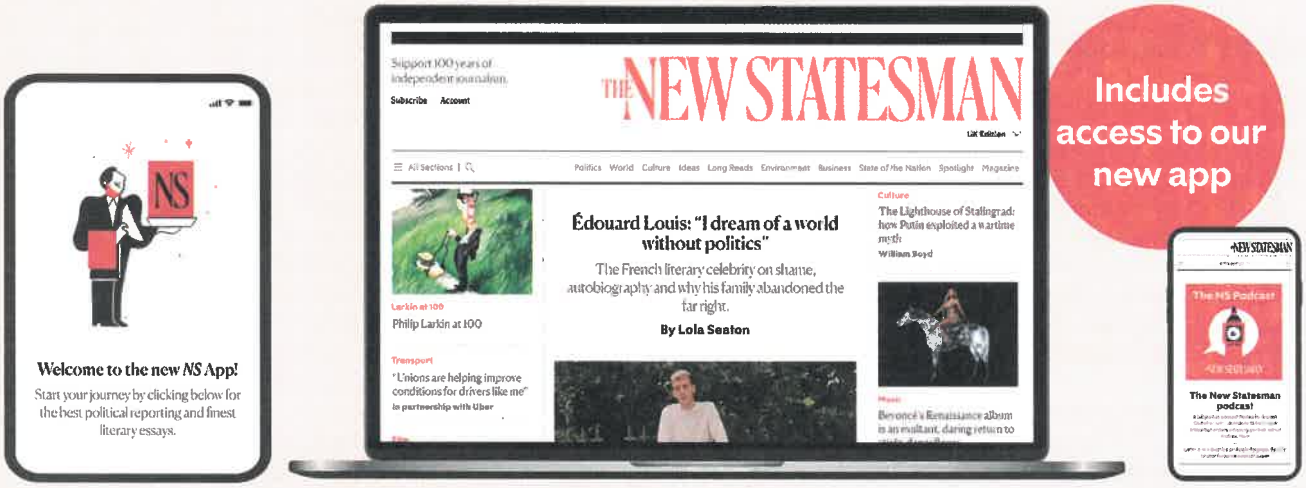
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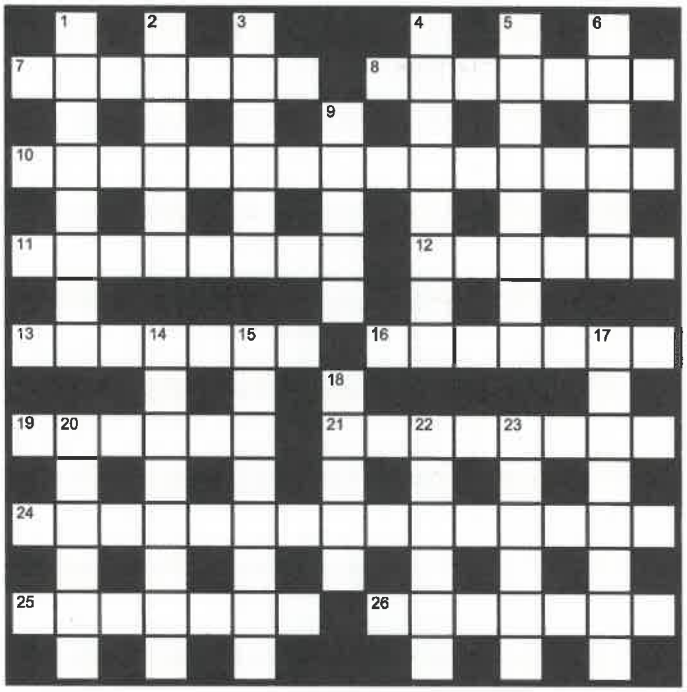
The NS Cryptic Crossword 600: Electricity bill by Delilah



Across

7 Agents in pursuit of unbridled lust in Caribbean island (2,5)
8 Let them be themselves for water under the bridge (7)
10/24/26 He held alternative hot food, yet ruined this puzzle's lines (4,3,6,2,5,4,3,3,7)
11/12 Carry knives for bones (8,6)
13 Monk's disorderly house finally changes hands (7)
16 Police getting free postage (7)
19/21 Fat lender corrupted New York boy poet (6,8)
24 See 10 Across
25 Brave to embrace learner's love (7)
26 See 10 Across

Down

1 Report of a big ship that's not moving (2,6)
2 This country and America upset about party game (6)
3 Team audibly breathed (6)
4 Each word of this clue has just one friend done up in fur (8)
5 Quartet listened to players' prediction (8)
6 From flipping cake to meringue is a long way off! (6)
9 White climber secures gold (5)
14 Both sides eating too much in the choke (8)
15 In the course of supporting French centre that lasts (8)
17 Given expert dived badly (8)
18 Examine your head after dust storm (5)
20 Piss-up in place with room to manoeuvre (6)
22 In denial by solicitor (3,3)
23 Say why deli product ultimately harms crops (6)

This week's solutions will be published in the next issue
Answers to crossword 599 of 16 September 2022
Across 7) *La Mer* 8) Realistic 10) Occupier 11) Rhesus 12) Tennis 13) Gander 15) Huss 17) Lilac 19) Shed 20) Thebes 22) In a row 25) Gandhi 26) On the sly 27) Fieldfare 28) Chime
Down 1) Bad cheque, 2) Tea urn 3) Pear 4) Florin 5) AS-levels 6) Lit up 9) Tinsel 13) Gales 14) Leg of lamb 16) Schedule 18) Chintz 21) Briefs 23) Ayesha 24) Radii 26) Ogre

Subscriber of the Week: Allan Cowan

What do you do?
I'm a retired solicitor and the former chairman of Partick Thistle football club.
Where do you live?
Bearsden, Glasgow.
Do you vote?
Every time.
How long have you been a subscriber?
Around eight years, but I've been a reader since my teens.
What made you start?
I wanted to read something left-leaning but not dogmatic.
What pages do you flick to first?
I start by glancing at the back.
How do you read yours?
With my morning coffee or in bed at night.
What would you like to see more of in the NS?
A separate Scottish edition.
Who are your favourite NS writers?
I always enjoy Hunter Davies and John Gray.
Who would you put on the cover of the NS?
Anas Sarwar, the leader of the Scottish Labour Party.
With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?
Alex Salmond.
All-time favourite NS article?
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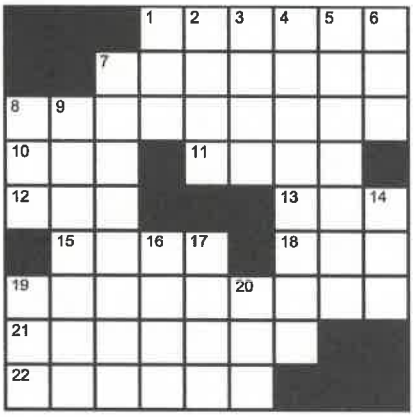
The NS Crossword In Brief 49: by Hoang-Kim Vu



Answers to crossword 48 of 16 September 2022
Across 1) Papa 5) Slam 9) Acid 10) Nine 11) I'm not a fan 13) Net 14) Wield 15) Soils 17) Prior 19) Woo 22) Fizzle out 24) Flee 25) Grit 26) Teds 27) OK so
Down 1) Pain 2) Acme 3) Pint-sized 4) Ado 5) Snail 6) Life's work 7) Anal 8) Mend 12) Twirl 16) Oozes 17) Pfft 18) Rile 20) Ouis 21) Otto 23) Ego

Across

1 See 3-Down
7 Spurs boss Conte
8 Dead lottery winner in a 1998 film
10 Elizabethan ___
11 A viral online joke
12 Gratuity
13 Insta
15 Alternative to "g2g"
18 Fixture, or draw
19 Footballer on a Bosman, eg
21 Adds oxygen
22 It ain't nothing but a hound dog!

Down

1 Like Beethoven's Second
2 Flower part
3 With 1-Across, dating show set in Mallorca
4 Brings Peppa to life, say
5 Bowling variation
6 A deer, a female deer!
7 Some travel necessities
8 Tennis need
9 Nation for Asmara
14 22-Across
16 The positive side?
17 Early opposite
19 *Ab*___
20 Obtain

Down and Out

Nicholas Lezard

My brush with King Charles 22 years ago still feels like it was yesterday. It was that bad

Today I am going to tell a story: the story about how I met the future King Charles, Stephen Fry, Michael Howard and John Major all on the same day. Actually, in the space of an hour.

Cast your mind back to the distant past – the year 2000. Britpop in the ascendant, Tony Blair in his pomp, Jack Straw as home secretary, being tough on the causes of crime etc. I, at the time, was the radio critic for the *Independent on Sunday*, and one day I received a stiff invitation in the post, about the size of a table mat in a posh home. And posh the invite was: to St James's Palace, to celebrate, along with the heir to the throne, the 50th anniversary of *The Archers*. The lettering on the card was raised, and I ran my finger along it, wondering if people who could read Braille would also be able to read this.

I was no monarchist, but I did like *The Archers*, or rather was gripped by it, the way an addict is gripped, so I could hardly refuse. Also, there was going to be champagne. Again, hard to refuse.

A few seconds after arriving I began to wonder seriously if I should have come at all. In those days I was also a well-respected book reviewer, insofar as book reviewers can be well-respected, and whenever I went to a book launch there were usually at least a dozen people in the room I knew well enough to chat to. Here, I knew almost everyone – by sight; and by sight alone.

The only person I felt I could approach, I realised, was Stephen Fry. I had two reasons: the first being that we had a mutual friend in Will Self. The second, which I considered the clincher, was that I had recently read his latest autobiography and had been pleased to come across a passage about his inspirational English teacher, Rory Stewart. I cannot remember how the passage went, but this was the gist: "Come up to me at any time and tell me you too were taught by Rory Stewart, and I will drop what I am doing at once and swap anecdotes about him with you."

Now, as it happened, I was also taught by Rory Stewart, at another school, and very fond of him I was too. Fry was speaking to someone else so I hovered at a slight distance, as one does, until there was a natural pause in their conversation, when, rather nervously, I introduced myself. I mentioned Will Self, and I added that I too had been taught by etc. At which he said, in a way that has burned itself into my memory for two decades and counting, "Oh really?", turned his back to me emphatically and carried on speaking to whoever it was.

I mooched around the room, among the great and the good, feeling sorry for myself. After a few more glasses, I spotted a group of people standing together: John Major, Michael Howard, his wife, and I forget who else. Feeling I had nothing to lose, I attached myself to them. They were polite. At one point I said to Michael Howard: "What's it like having a Labour home secretary who's even more authoritarian than you were?" They went into a huddle as if to decide whether to laugh at this. They decided they would. Still anxious to cause something of a scene, I then asked John Major if it was true he regretted selling off school playing fields, and therefore cricket pitches. And he replied, earnestly, that it was, and then we talked cricket for a while.

During this chat there was a discreet tap on my shoulder: it was the official photographer, asking my name and alerting me that Prince Charles was about to shake my hand, as he had to shake everyone's, and the moment was to be recorded. And so he did, and it was. The prince mumbled a few words of the how-do-you-do-nice-to-meet-you variety, and he moved on. Fair enough: there were a lot of people there.

A few days later I received a contact print of my meeting with the Prince of Wales. At the exact moment the photo was taken, someone had stepped in between me and the photographer, so what we had was a picture of the heir to the throne shaking a disembodied hand that could have belonged to anyone wearing a suit. The accompanying letter apologised, and said I could either have this image as a keepsake, or a signed photo of the prince alone. I thought about this for a very short time. I didn't fancy the idea of having a signed photo of Prince Charles on display and having to explain why I had one every time someone saw it; and Will Self, even less of a royalist than I was, had already told me off for attending the bash in the first place. So I said no thank you.

After that, I decided to slip into obscurity. The high life was not for me; it was too fraught with potential embarrassment. But here are the things I took away from the occasion (I was too flustered even to steal an ashtray). John Major: thoroughly decent man without airs and graces; Michael Howard: nicer than you'd think; Charles: busy man doing a job; Stephen Fry: no comment. ●

MARTA SIGNORI

State of the Nation

Highlights from the NS's online data hub

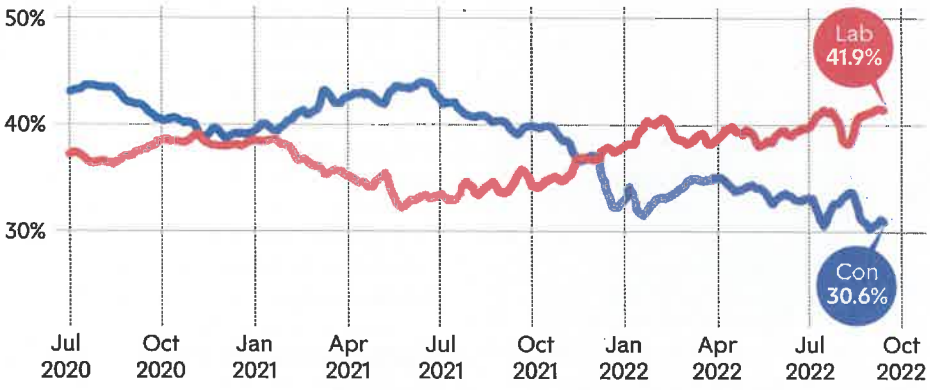
How does the UK compare to the rest of the world?

	GDP growth forecast for 2022 (%)	GDP growth forecast for 2023 (%)	Interest rate (%)	Inflation rate (CPI, %)	Petrol prices (US$ per litre)	Median age (years)	Covid-19 vaccines per 100 people
Great Britain	**3.2**	**0.5**	**1.8**	**9.9**	**2.0**	**39.6**	**224.8**
Brazil	1.7	1.1	13.3	8.7	1.0	32.8	220.1
Canada	3.4	1.8	2.5	7.6	1.3	40.2	233.4
China	3.3	4.6	3.7	2.5	1.3	37.9	240.9
France	2.3	1.0	0.5	5.9	1.5	41.6	221.9
Germany	1.2	0.8	0.5	7.9	2.0	44.9	221.9
Italy	3.0	0.7	0.5	8.4	1.7	46.8	237.2
Japan	1.7	1.7	-0.1	2.6	1.2	48.4	257.4
Russia	-6.0	-3.5	8.0	14.3	0.9	38.8	121.3
Spain	4.0	2.0	0.5	10.5	1.7	43.9	201.5
US	2.3	1.0	2.5	8.3	1.0	37.7	184.6

SOURCES: IMF, JULY; TRADING ECONOMICS; GLOBAL PETROL PRICES

Britain Elects: Westminster voting intentions

How popular is the Labour Party compared to the Conservative Party?



SOURCE: BRITAIN ELECTS

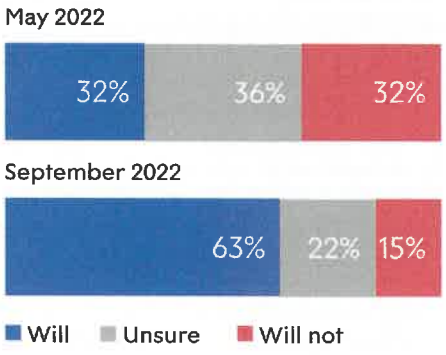
Fracking returns to the UK

As Liz Truss lifts the ban, where will it resume first?

SOURCE: OIL & GAS AUTHORITY

Support for Charles has surged

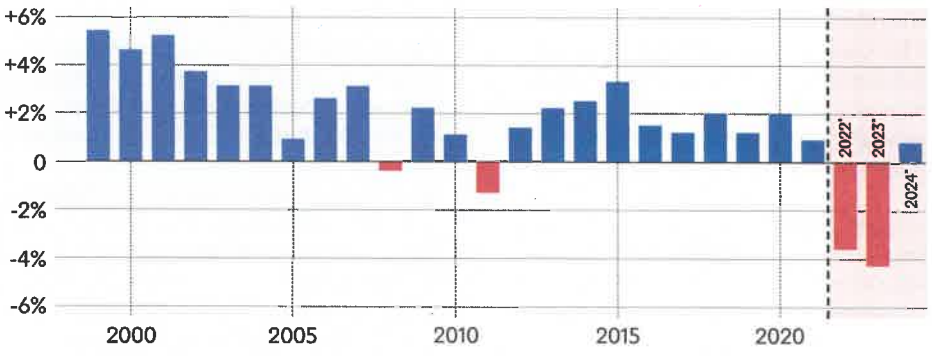
Will Charles make a good King?



SOURCE: YOUGOV

UK households will experience the worst fall in living standards in 60 years

Real post-tax household income growth (%), year on year

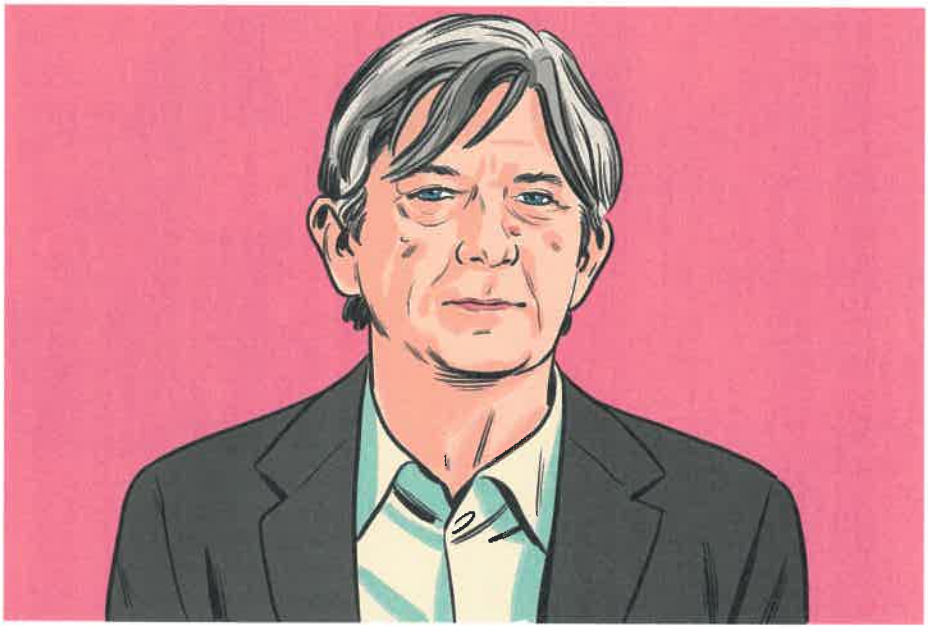


SOURCE: THE BANK OF ENGLAND *PROJECTED FIGURES

The NS Q&A

"Anybody who isn't in a state of anxiety isn't paying attention"

Deyan Sudjic, design critic and curator



Deyan Sudjic was born in London in 1952. An author and architecture critic, he was also the director of the Venice Architecture Biennale and of the Design Museum in Kensington, west London.

What's your earliest memory?
The moment that I, a small and painfully English child, realised that my parents, migrants with a tenuous grip on the right to residency in Britain, spoke a version of English quite unlike anybody else's.

Who are your heroes?
Dan Dare and Tintin both turned out to have feet of clay, but were very helpful in inoculating me against hero worship.

What book last changed your thinking?
Dombey and Son by Charles Dickens. Rereading it helped me realise that a fictionalised account can be a more powerful way of understanding the structure of a city than any amount of scientific analysis.

Which political figure do you look up to?
That line-up of the late Queen's living prime ministers in St James's Palace made the tragic state of contemporary politics so clear. Gordon Brown – whom I worked with when we were students – and John Major emerge as the serious figures.

What would be your "Mastermind" specialist subject?
London. It's a city founded by Romans that is older than anything that could conceivably be described as England, and a place where I have lived most of my life.

In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?
Vienna in 1900. It was the capital of an empire on the edge of oblivion, yet was busy inventing modernity.

Who would paint your portrait?
I would love to persuade Michael Craig-Martin to do it. I know he would be great to talk to in the studio, and I could be sure that he would make my warts disappear.

What's your theme tune?
For a long time I had to see Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* at least every six months. Bernard Herrmann's theme is as brilliant as Saul Bass's opening titles.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?
When I worked as the architecture critic at the *Sunday Times*, the sub-editor who sometimes struggled with my copy suggested never using the word "fenestration" when "window" was perfectly good. I have done my best.

What's currently bugging you?
Anybody who is not in a continuous state of anxiety about the world isn't paying attention. Focusing on the particular rather than the general makes things a little more bearable. I focus on the mindless aggression that passes for debate, summed up by Nadine Dorries' Twitter feed.

What single thing would make your life better?
Patience.

When were you happiest?
Celebrating the achievements of my wife and my daughter.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?
I set out to be an architect, but realised that I was hopelessly unsuited to the task of turning an idea into a physical reality.

Are we all doomed?
Looking at burning suburbs from Melbourne to Essex and floods from Pakistan to China, I try to comfort myself by remembering that Extinction Rebellion's antecedents include the many apocalyptic millenarian movements who believed that the world would end from the year 1000 onward. It doesn't really help.

"Stalin's Architect" by Deyan Sudjic is published by MIT Press. It is shortlisted for the Pushkin House Prize, which will be announced on 28 September

KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

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